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THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SCIENCES
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

**RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY:
WHAT DRIVES RUSSIA'S SUPPORT FOR THE AL-ASSAD REGIME?**

MARY LEVOCZ

UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF DR. RIHAM BAH

A THESIS SUBMITTED
IN PARTIAL FUFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENS FOR THE DEGREEE OF
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SPRING 2015

**RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY:
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A THESIS SUBMITTED BY:

MARY LEVOCZ

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO

SPRING 2015

HAS BEEN APPROVED BY:

DR. RIHAM BAH
THESIS COMMITTEE ADVISOR _____

DR. ALLISON HODGKINS
THESIS COMMITTEE READER _____

DR. IBRIHIM ELNUR
THESIS COMMITTEE READER _____

_____	_____
DEPT. CHAIR	DATE

_____	_____
DEAN OF HUSS	DATE

Abstract

The current crisis in Syria has left the international community divided on solutions regarding the ongoing civil war that has escalated far beyond protests calling for the removal of the al-Assad regime. The events unfolding in Syria have divided the international community into groups that staunchly oppose the al-Assad regime, such as the United States, the European Union, and other countries in the region, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, and those that oppose any pressure to the regime, such as Russia, China, and Iran. The primary purpose of this thesis is to determine why Russia would support such an unpopular, internationally isolated regime amidst the current instability in the Middle East. Secondly, this thesis will examine the internal factors that influence Russian foreign policy towards Syria, displaying that Russia's support for the al-Assad regime goes far beyond Russian interests in Syria and Russian-Syrian relations. This research displays how Russia's decision to back the Syrian regime has affected its international status in an attempt to demonstrate Russia's largest foreign policy goal: great power status.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The uprising in Syria in March 2011, which has culminated into the Syrian Civil War was a result of protests organized with the intention of facilitating change to the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Various factors, such as the unsuccessful attempt to instigate regime change by the opposition forces, a United Nations reported death toll of over 200,000 people killed, an estimated 3.7 million Syrian refugees, the use of chemical weapons, and the threat posed by ISIS in the region, has brought the Syrian Civil War to the international communities attention. The events unfolding in Syria have divided the international community into groups that staunchly oppose the al-Assad regime, such as the United States, the European Union, and other countries in the region, such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, and those that oppose any pressure to the regime, such as Russia, China, and Iran. This divide amongst the international community has prolonged any attempt at resolving the crisis and has tested the efficiency, credibility, and strength of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, opposition forces throughout Syria have been deeply divided in their fight against the al-Assad regime, worrying the international community of the increased sectarian warfare spreading beyond Syria's borders. At the beginning of the conflict, initial minor protests against the al-Assad regime were instigated by Syrian civilians calling for reforms against the

harsh regime and its security forces. Now, in 2015, Syria's opposition forces have fallen wayside as the international community tackles the danger posed by ISIS, which has declared its goals the establishment of a hardline Sunni Islamic State, a caliphate in Iraq, and the removal of the al-Assad regime in Syria. The formation of ISIS has diverted international attention away from the core dispute in the Syrian Civil War and the future status of the al-Assad regime, while evolving into a war against terrorism that has further destabilized the region.

The conflict in Syria has put pressure on the international community, most importantly the United States and the UNSC, to present a decisive plan on handling the current situation. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P), a legally binding international law prohibiting mass atrocities against civilians within a state, is a fairly new concept adopted by the Security Council in 2006. Two of the five permanent members of the Security Council, Russia and China, have utilized their veto power to continuously halt any development towards any UN policy implementation concerning intervening in or resolving the Syrian Civil War. Syria is becoming increasingly more isolated from the international community and the future status of the regime is uncertain. "A growing consensus of leaders around the world believe the fall of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is inevitable", making the question of his fall a matter of 'when', "yet Russia continues to support the Assad regime and reject international calls to curb its actions".¹ While politicians and scholars alike may speculate on the demise of the al-Assad regime, four years after the initial uprising in

¹ Nicholas Kosturos, *What Drives Russia's Unrelenting Position on Syria?* Center for American Progress. 2012.

March 2011, the Syrian Civil War has continued to devastate Syria and raise concern regarding the implementation of norms, such as R2P.

As the conflict between the al-Assad regime and the Syrian opposition forces continues and the international community is stuck in a stalemate regarding intervention, it is apparent that there are no simple solutions on how to handle the civil war. International and domestic attempts for resolving the conflict have been dismissed, due to the opposition's requirement of the removal of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad. Claims for intervention, whether military or humanitarian, have been promoted through various justifications, such as a response to the use of chemical weapons and the current rise of radical terrorist groups in the region, attempting to justify the legality for the use of force. During the beginning stages of the conflict, unofficial military intervention, to both the al-Assad regime and the Syrian opposition, had been taking place from various countries. "Russia and Iran continue supplying the Assad regime with arms and military advice", while "at the other end of the spectrum, Turkey and several Arab states have been helping rebel groups secure arms and funds since the start of the conflict".² Since August 2014, a US-led coalition of countries from the Middle East and Europe have contributed military forces and support to moderate Syrian opposition forces and other forces in the region, along with airstrikes against ISIS. For the Syrian regime, the threat posed by ISIS may have temporarily diverted attention away from itself and towards the growing threat in the region, but Syrian opposition forces, U.S. President Barack Obama, and many countries in the Middle East, such as Turkey, continue to demand

² Amir Taheri, "Has the Time Come for Military Intervention in Syria?" *American Foreign Policy Interests* 35.4 (2013): 217-20.

that the Syrian regime be removed. Most recently, the U.S. and Turkey signed an agreement to provide ground forces to the moderate Syrian opposition in order to fight both the threat posed by ISIS and to strengthen the Syrian opposition in their fight against the al-Assad regime. These agreements, along with other international pressure, demonstrate that calls for the removal of the al-Assad regime are still a significant goal for Syrian opposition forces and many nations alike.

1.2 Research Question

Amongst Syria's allies, Russia has stepped up as the foremost defender of the al-Assad regime. Russia provides the Syrian regime with political, economic, and military support, which has been utilized to defend the regime against pressure from the many Western and Arab countries calling for the removal of Assad. For example, in February of 2012, the UN Security Council failed to adopt a draft resolution that was aimed at stopping the continued violence in Syria, while demanding that the Syrian government cease crimes against its population. Out of the 15 countries that voted on this draft resolution, 13 members voted in favor of the resolution, while Russia and China vetoed the draft in support of the al-Assad regime. British foreign secretary William Hague responded to the vetoed draft by stating, "the time is long past for the international community, particularly those that have so far sheltered the Assad regime, to intensify the pressure to end over 10 months of violence".³ The almost unanimous decision to accept the draft resolution demands the following questions: why does Russia support and continue to support the al-Assad regime

³ Paul Harris, "Syria Resolution Vetoed by Russia and China at United Nations." *The Guardian*. 4 Feb. 2012.

despite international pressure? Why has Russia continued to support the al-Assad regime during the Syrian Civil War at the expense of its relations with the West, other Arab countries, and the potential future leaders of Syria? While there is obvious speculation on the issue of Russia's support for the al-Assad regime, research into this complex issue displays that scholars have only begun to analyze this relationship; therefore, scholarly books, journals, and articles are limited in scope. Scholars have only presented the issue of Russia's foreign policy towards Syria as a partial picture that lacks the broader analysis of the complex issue, focusing on bilateral economic relations or various regional factors that limit fully understanding Russian foreign policy towards the Syrian regime. This thesis will provide a more in-depth analysis and analyze the main explanatory factors of Russia's foreign policy towards Syria, attempting to address the rather complex motives behind Russia's support for the al-Assad regime.

The main research question this thesis will answer is: why does Russia support the al-Assad regime during the Syrian Civil War? This thesis will also focus on addressing the following research sub-questions:

- 1) How are various domestic factors linked to Russian foreign policy implementation towards Syria?
- 2) How is Russia's foreign policy decision towards Syria affecting its relationship with the West?
- 3) How is Russia's foreign policy decision towards Syria affecting its relationship with countries in the Middle East?

The first sub-question will help address and explain why various internal factors, regarding Russia's foreign policy vis-à-vis Syria, are crucial to better understanding the evolution and rationale of Russian foreign policy. By analyzing Russia's relationships with the West and various countries in the Middle East, the sub-questions will further display how Russia's support for the al-Assad regime has helped Russia enhance its great power status on the systemic level. By addressing these questions, this thesis will display how Russia's support for the al-Assad regime is based on its attempt at great power status.

1.3 Hypothesis

Amongst international pressure to resolve the issue of civil war in Syria, Russia has continued to support a regime that may potentially fall. There are many explanations highlighted by scholars that fall short of comprehensively analyzing Russia's foreign policy towards Syria, such as Russia's military facilities in Tartus, military and trade sales, and the fact that Syria is among the few allies Russia has in the Middle East. These are micro level explanations focused on interests, where the gains made by Russia at all these levels do not outweigh the cost of supporting a regime in Syria that has been isolated internationally and may not survive. At the systemic level, Russian support for the al-Assad regime is centered on Russia's perception of the international system and its role in it. Russian foreign policy and its leaders view the world in a multipolar framework attempting to bolster Russia's status internationally, while balancing U.S./Western hegemony. Russia's strategy

towards Syria has affected its relationships with the United States and other countries in the Middle East and, ultimately, Russia's decision to support Syria will play a major role in how both Russia and the international community perceive its status of power. This thesis will analyze how Russia's decision to back the al-Assad regime in Syria has demonstrated Russia's desire for great power status, focusing on how Russia has utilized this relationship to strengthen and project Russian global, regional, and domestic power and influence. At the state level, Russian support for the al-Assad regime is centered on select factors that challenge and advance Russia's great power self-perception and status among the international system. Major domestic factors, such as regime type, the role of media, internal conflicts, and Russia's energy sector, contribute to the rationale behind Russia's foreign policy strategy towards Syria. This thesis will look further into Russian foreign policy-making and will analyze how Russia's policy towards the al-Assad regime has been influenced by specific internal factors.

Central to this hypothesis is the concept of sovereignty challenged by the concept of humanitarian intervention, which Russia believes "could be abused by powerful states as justifications for interventions that serve their political purpose".⁴ The logic of state sovereignty does not recognize intervention for humanitarian purposes; rather it assumes hegemonic motives behind states' actions, specifically the United States. For Russia, any attempt at intervening in the Syrian Civil War outside of the approval of the UN Security Council, would be in direct violation of Syria's

⁴ Paul R. Williams, J. Trevor Ulbrick, and Jonathan Worboys. "Preventing Mass Atrocity Crimes: The Responsibility to Protect and the Syria Crisis." *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 45 (2012): 473-503.

sovereignty; therefore, Russia has and continues to defend the Syrian regime despite internal pressure for al-Assad's removal in a greater attempt to defend state sovereignty and prevent regime change on behalf of Western interests in the region.

1.4 Methods and Chapter Outline

This thesis will utilize qualitative research methods based on secondary research for collecting data, examining both primary and secondary sources to help answer the research questions and sub-questions in this thesis. Sources, via print or the Internet, will consist of the following: books, journal articles and conference papers, newspapers, and research reports from NGOs and think-tanks. More importantly, official Russian statements, transcripts, and other official documents will be accessed from various official Russian government sources and archives in order to fully grasp the discourse provided by the Russian government regarding their decisions, interests, and foreign policy. The research conducted for this thesis will incorporate historical research in order to understand the past relations that have impacted the present foreign policy of the Russian government.

This thesis will be divided into four chapters. Following the Introduction, Chapter 2 will examine the current scholarly contributions regarding Russian foreign policy, Russian-Syrian relations, and claims for intervention into the Syrian Civil War. The literature survey of these topics will provide the reader with the analysis of scholars in the IR and political science fields in an attempt to provide a brief explanation of the literature that exists regarding these topics. This chapter will also examine the theories this thesis will utilize to analyze and answer questions regarding

Russian support for the al-Assad regime. Chapter 3 will examine Russian foreign policy-making from its international, regional, and domestic goals to its overall agenda, while examining how identity has factored into to Russian foreign policy-making and its goal at establishing Russia as a greater power. The second portion of Chapter 3 will evaluate Russian foreign policy and its relations with the West, Syria, and other countries in the Middle East, focusing on how Russia's decision to defend the Syrian regime has affected those relationships. Chapter 4 examines the internal factors that have influenced Russian foreign policy towards the Syrian regime, focusing on four key factors that have had direct influence on Russian policy towards Syria. Finally, Chapter 5 will conclude the thesis by providing a summary of the analysis regarding Russian support for the al-Assad regime, examining the conclusions made during the research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This chapter will begin by outlining the current literature regarding key topics surrounding important issues in the paper. The second section of this chapter will present this thesis' main theoretical framework, which will be applied to this thesis in an attempt to answer questions regarding Russian foreign policy towards Syria.

2.1 Literature Review

In order to provide answers to the research question(s) presented in this thesis, a wide range of literature was examined in order to determine how scholars have analyzed the following topics: Russian foreign policy, Russian foreign policy towards Syria, and claims for intervention in Syria. In the following three sub-sections, a brief overview of the following topics will highlight the research that exists regarding the topics, focusing on trends and major viewpoints of scholars in the field of international politics and political science.

Russian Foreign Policy

It is undeniable that the literature that exists regarding Russian foreign policy is extensive, far beyond the capabilities of a simple introduction to the current research that exists. Before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the approach to studying Russian foreign policy was dominated by scholarly efforts, such as Adam Ulam's *Expansion and Coexistence* (1968), leaving scholars to focus on ideological factors that influenced Russia's expansionist foreign policy. Since then, scholars have questioned Russian foreign policy-making, applying an array of theories and

explanations as an attempt to analyze and explain Russia's foreign policy. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has survived a global transformation, but has remained fairly consistent with its history of a rather centralized decision-making process in foreign policy. "Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russian foreign policy has been heavily influenced by a perceived loss of great power status and a drive to restore Russia's rightful place in world politics".⁵ While the power behind Russian foreign policy may have weakened since the days of the Cold War, Russia continues to yield its influence through various factors, such as its seat as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, its nuclear status, and its dominant role as a regional power.

Scholars have varied in their findings regarding Russian behavior towards the West with arguments varying from cooperative to confrontational. Tsygankov argues that the world we live in today is still dominated by Western power, although waning, leaving Russian foreign policy open to cooperation with both Western and non-Western partners. For Russia, some of its most important networks for diplomatic or economic cooperation consist of collaboration with countries such as China and Iran, which has been utilized to increase Russian influence and power while establishing a favorable geopolitical environment for the Russian Federation. Russia's current foreign policy is motivated by the increase in Russian global, regional, and domestic power, with Russian leaders concerned more with policies that benefit Russian interests. Tsygankov argues, "what often determines Moscow's foreign policy

⁵ Paul D'Anieri, "Russian Foreign Policy: Continuity, Revolution, and the Search for Status." *Foreign Policy in Comparative Perspective: Domestic and International Influences on State Behavior*. By Ryan K. Beasley. Washington, D.C.: CQ, 2002. 95-118.

choices is whether or not the West's international actions are perceived by Russian officials as accepting Russia as an equal and legitimate member of the world".⁶

Russia has recently experienced a period free from external foreign threats but has faced a wide array of internal and regional challenges that have left Russian leaders extremely insecure regarding their countries future. After the increase of terrorist activities in the Caucasus and the attacks on the U.S in September 2001, Russian President Vladimir Putin took advantage of the 'war on terror' to reinforce Russia's domestic and international position in order to justify his formation and reaction to security threats. Lo states, "it was similarly predictable that international terrorism should emerge at the top of the agenda; its inclusion in this way tapped into the mood of the political elite and the public at large, and served to 'legitimize' the Putin administration's conduct of the Chechen war at home and abroad".⁷ Russia aligned itself with the Western struggle against terrorism in the Middle East in an attempt to strengthen Russia's international status while protecting Russian interests and preserve regional stability.

Currently, Russia has found itself involved as a major participant in two extremely important international crises that may potentially alter its status among the international community: the spread of ISIS's growing influence in the region and the Russian annexation of the Crimea. The current spread of radical terrorist groups in Syria and Iraq has resulted in military action from the international community, with a US-led coalition against ISIS. The Russian government has stated any action

⁶ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010.

⁷ Bobo Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion, and Mythmaking*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002: 71.

without UN authorization “would be an act of aggression, a gross violation of international law”.⁸ Russia has condemned any unauthorized external action in Syria increasing the chance for confrontation between Russia and the West. Along with the current situation in Syria, Russia has received international attention and pressure, such as economic sanctions from the US and many European countries, for its involvement in the deployment of Russian troops and the annexation of Ukraine’s Crimea region. Nichols argues that “the seizure and annexation of Crimea appeared to surprise some policy makers by its speed and brazenness” and that the events that have unfolded “could be one stage in a multi-stage effort that could involve an effort to seize more control over eastern and southern Ukraine”.⁹

Russian Foreign Policy Towards Syria

Foreign relations between Russia and Syria date back to the Soviet Union, when “Syria became the largest noncommunist buyer of Soviet weapons, and the Syrian leaders considered Moscow to be their “only dependable global ally” who did not force them to compromise their own vital interests.”¹⁰ In 2014, Syria finds itself isolated from the international community with a reliable ally in Putin who continues to supply the Syrian government with arms and continues to use Russia’s power in the UN Security Council to block any resolutions against the al-Assad regime.

⁸ Alexei Anishchuk, "Russia Says Air Strikes in Syria Would Be Act of Aggression without U.N. Vote." *Reuters*. Thomson Reuters, 11 Sept. 2014. <<http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/09/11/us-syria-crisis-russia-airstrikes-idUSKBN0H61KV20140911>>.

⁹ United States. Cong. *Russian Political, Economic, and Security Issues and U.S. Interests*. By Jim Nichol. Cong. Rept. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, 2014.

¹⁰ Andrej Kreutz, *Russia in the Middle East: Friend or Foe?* Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2007.

Committeri argues that Russian support for the Syrian regime and its opposition with the other permanent members of the UNSC on Syria “can largely be seen as related to Resolution 1973” in Libya.¹¹ Allison argues that Moscow’s attempt to block sanctions against al-Assad and its support for the regime are based on “a narrative centered on the principle of territorial sovereignty, which regrets the notion that states can be held subject to standards of political legitimacy devised in western capitals”.¹² Russia’s policy towards Syria, and many other non-democratic regimes for that matter, has been to negotiate with the sitting government and not the opposition, which has been supported by “a number of governments and non-state actors that are opposed to U.S. policies or are simply wedded to the traditional values of international relations, such as state sovereignty and nonintervention”.¹³

Scholars, such as Troyanksy (2013), Khlebnikov (2011), and Gaub and Popsecu (2013) attribute Russian foreign policy towards Syria to economic and material interests, such as Russian arms exports. While economic interests exist for Russian support in Syria, “Moscow’s financial deals with a number of nations in the Greater Middle East- particularly Turkey and Israel- by far exceed Russia’s trade with Syria”.¹⁴ It is undeniable that there are various Russian interests satisfied by the current relationship with the Syrian government, but Russian foreign policy towards Syria cannot be understood through explanations based on ‘interest’ alone. This thesis

¹¹ Camilla Committeri, "When Domestic Factors Prevail Upon Foreign Ambitions: Russia's Strategic Game in Syria." *IAI Working Papers* 12.26, (2012): 5-6.

¹² Roy Allison, *Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis*. Malden, MA: International Affairs 89:4 (2013): 795-823.

¹³ Dmitri Trenin, *The Mythical Alliance: Russia's Syria Policy*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (2013): 3-4.

¹⁴ Andrej Kreutz, *Syria: Russia's Best Asset in the Middle East*. Russie.Nei.Visions no. 55, Institut français des relations internationales, Paris, Nov. 2010, pg. 9
http://www.ifri.org/?page=contribution-detail&id=6301&id_provenance=97.

will attempt to analyze modern Russian-Syrian relations in-depth in Chapter 3.

Bagdonas argues that “the realization of Russia’s material interests in the Middle East largely depends on the global and regional power balance, profit as a motive in foreign policy-decision making is secondary to power and prestige, at least in this particular case”.¹⁵ Russian foreign policy towards Syria is based on a deep-rooted, mutually beneficial relationship that is providing both regimes with tools to achieve their goals.

Claims for Intervention in Syria

“Syria can still be saved from the worst calamity- if the international community can show the courage and leadership necessary to compromise on their partial interests for the sake of the Syrian people”.¹⁶ This quote came after Kofi Annan, former United Nations Secretary-General, resigned from the position of Special Envoy to Syria in early August 2012. Much debate exists throughout the international system regarding the decision to intervene in the Syrian Civil War, but after four years of conflict, the international community continues to be divided and a diplomatic solution is even further from fruition. Claims for humanitarian intervention have emerged from the concept of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which “is a complicated and ‘emerging norm’ of international law that seeks to provide a means for the international community to prevent mass atrocity crimes

¹⁵ Azuolas Bagdonas, "Russia's Interests in the Syrian Conflict: Power, Prestige, and Profit." *European Journal of Economic and Political Science* 5.2 (2012): 55-77.

¹⁶ Kofi Annan, “Press Conference by Kofi Annan, Joint Special Envoy for Syria”. The United Nations in the Heart of Europe. Geneva, 2 August 2012.

occurring within the boundaries of a sovereign state”.¹⁷ Under Article 24 of the Charter of the United Nations, the UNSC has the “primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security”; therefore, the Security Council is the ultimate authority on decision-making regarding the use of armed force to preserve or reestablish international peace and security.¹⁸ Stahn argues that the case for intervention in Syria “was not directly aimed at ending atrocities and armed conflict as such, but guided by other purposes”, which have been to shift power from Assad and to reprimand the unlawful use of chemical weapons.¹⁹ “

Since the beginning of the crisis, those in favor of intervention have focused on the number of deaths, internally displaced persons, and refugees that have accumulated during the Syrian Civil War, but claims for intervening were reignited after a chemical weapons attack in the Damascus suburb of Ghouta.²⁰ Blockman argues that the “specific offence that pushed the Obama administration across its self-imposed red line is not the humanitarian disaster”, but “the apparent use, on August 21st, of chemical weapons, which allegedly killed more than 1,400 people”.²¹ As the international community speculated upon whom to blame, the governments of the United States and Great Britain contemplated the legality of military force under a

¹⁷ Paul R. Williams, J. Trevor Ulbrick, and Jonathan Worboys. “Preventing Mass Atrocity Crimes: The Responsibility to Protect and the Syria Crisis.” *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 45 (2012): 473-503.

¹⁸ United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations*, 24 October 1945, 1 UNTS XVI, available at: <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3930.html> [accessed 12 March 2014].

¹⁹ Carsten Stahn, “Between Law-breaking and Law-making: Syria, Humanitarian Intervention and ‘What the Law Ought to Be.’” *Journal of Conflict Security Law*. (2013): 970.

²⁰ Kenneth Anderson, “Legality of Intervention in Syria in Response to Chemical Weapons Attacks.” *American Society of International Law* 17.21 (2013).

²¹ Steven Blockmans, “Syria and the Red Lines of International Law.” *Center for European Policy Studies* (2013). Web. <<http://www.ceps.eu/book/syria-and-red-lines-international-law>>.

rationale of preventative diplomacy.²² Ultimately, Stahn (2013), Taheri (2013), and Francioni and Bakker (2013) have dissected the concept of the R2P doctrine and the legality of humanitarian intervention in Syria and argue that intervention in Syria without UNSC authorization is not credible and would be dangerous.²³

Currently, the literature that exists regarding Russia's foreign policy towards Syria provides a limited explanation for Russian support of the al-Assad regime. Previous research has employed generalized attempts at analyzing this extremely complex topic, resulting in brief contributions to the field of international relations. Research into the topic of contemporary Russian-Syrian relations reveals an absence of scholarly works that extends beyond journal articles with limited explanations. By adopting a structured and focused examination of Russia's foreign policy and its support for the Syrian regime, this thesis will attempt to provide a more in-depth, inclusive contribution to the existing literature. This thesis intends to advance the literature targeted at understanding Russian foreign policy behavior towards the al-Assad regime by examining Russia's foreign policy through a multifaceted theoretical lens, focusing on internal and external factors.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

Analyzing Russian foreign policy and Russia's decision to support the al-Assad regime in Syria cannot be done without the proper theoretical discussion. The

²² Carsten Stahn, "Between Law-breaking and Law-making: Syria, Humanitarian Intervention and 'What the Law Ought to Be'." *Journal of Conflict Security Law*. (2013).

²³ Ahmed Souaiaia, "The Dangers of Military Intervention in Syria Without UNSC Authorization." *OpenDemocracy*. <<http://www.opendemocracy.net/ahmed-e-souaiaia/dangers-of-military-intervention-in-syria-without-unsc-authorization>>.

relationship between theory and policy is undeniably important with respect to the coordination of all state policy, including economic, political, and military tools, or a states' 'grand strategy'. Theory is utilized in a states' strategy like a model, or cause-and-effect hypotheses, that policymakers employ in an attempt to produce the most strategic outcomes.

There is consensus among scholars that some countries have a larger influence on international politics than others, otherwise known as great powers. Waltz argues that great powers tend to behave differently than other states, because of their capabilities. Scholars have tried to place a set of criteria to the characteristics and capabilities of what they categorize as great powers. Waltz claims that great powers must excel in areas over other states in one or more of the following ways: size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence.²⁴ Levy claims that great powers are distinguishable from other states by the following: 1) "a high level of military capability that makes them relatively self-sufficient strategically and capable of projecting power beyond their borders; 2) a broad concept of security that embraces a concern with regional and/or global power balances; and 3) a greater assertiveness than lesser powers in defining and defending their interest".²⁵ While scholars have presented a wide array of definitions for defining a 'great power', ultimately, attempts at great power measurement stem from two major factors, economic and political power.

²⁴ Kenneth N Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*. McGraw-Hill, 1979: 131.

²⁵ Jack Levy, *War and the Modern Great Power System*. Lexington University, 1983: 11-19.

The concepts of great power and the rivalries that exist between those great powers originate in offensive realist theory. Classical realist theory is based on the belief that states, in an anarchic system, operate out of rational self-interest in competition for security and power. One of the most important differences between the various proponents of realism versus offensive realism is that realists view states in competition for security and power to assure survival, while offensive realists argue that states seek power with hegemony as their ultimate goal.²⁶ Mearsheimer argues that calculations regarding a states' power form the foundation for how a state views the international system and their position in it. Research on interstate rivalry demonstrates that scholars, such as Goertz and Diehl (1995), claim "that international shocks to the system in the form of world wars or territorial shifts" drastically affect rivalry dynamics.²⁷ The authors argue that the strategic interests of great power rivalries are contingent on their ability to threaten and compete with other states. Ultimately, great power rivalry theory states that the distribution of power in the international system influences the number of great powers and their polarity, or how that power is distributed.

Unfortunately, explanations for Russian foreign policy based on the theory of great power rivalry alone do not present the complete context. Under the framework of realism, power is the main influencing factor behind a countries foreign policy, leaving no room for the inclusion of cultural beliefs, such as identity, or indigenous views seen through the Russian perspective. As a result, realism can overlook or

²⁶ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: Norton, 2001: 22.

²⁷ Michael P. Colaresi, *Scare Tactics: The Politics of International Rivalry*. Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2005: 6.

wrongfully interpret explanations or changes in Russian foreign policy, providing an incomprehensive explanatory framework. This thesis proposes a complimentary theory in order to ensure a more complete understanding of Russian foreign policy in Syria. This thesis will utilize constructivist theory, arguing that Russia's great power status is that of a self-perceived status, examining how the identity of Russia as a great power has affected its foreign policy. Unlike realism, constructivism is a theory in international relations that questions the 'national' understanding of a state's interest, focusing on identity and local factors that influence policy. For realism, foreign policy can be viewed as a product of a unitary state's advancing power, while constructivism views the role of foreign policy as a means to put forth a particular national identity or image that will be recognized internally and by the 'other'.²⁸ For Russia, foreign policy is a tool utilized in the pursuit of increasing its great power status, which is an intrinsic part of the Russian national identity, or image, already. For Russia, notions of great power are entrenched from a historical legacy that has left Russia seeking international prestige. Arguments over identity and its link to Russian foreign policy as a means for establishing Russia as the great power are based in the theory of constructivism.

It is important to note that this thesis does not argue that realism is constructivism and constructivism is realism. When defining and examining theories in international relations it is obvious that these theories do not exist on a simple linear association with each other, but I argue that there is room for overlap between the two. This thesis recognizes that these theories are distinct but compatible. J. Samuel Barkin

²⁸ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010: 14-17.

argues, “a realist constructivism is a constructivism in which a concern for power politics, understood as relational rather than structural, is central”.²⁹

Identity has played a major role in questions regarding Russia’s status and what role Russia should be in the international system. The collapse of the Soviet Union was an extremely difficult challenge for Russia, signaling the shift from superpower to ‘second-tier’ status. In the post-Cold War international arena, questions are asked by scholars about whether Russia should attempt to reinvent itself as a regional power or continue to try to strengthen its great power status. “One significant idea that has resurfaced in contemporary Russian culture has been the traditional messianic view that Russia is a unique country which must pursue its own path of development that is necessarily different from that of the West, and will have a special, distinctive role to play in the future”.³⁰

Regardless of the sincerity or skepticism one assigns to notions of great power status, it is undeniable that the theme of great power status has been a major component of modern Russian foreign policy. This theme can be found in the Russian sense of greatness (*derzhavnost*), which some scholars have translated as “French estatism on steroids, almost the cult of the great state”.³¹ *Derzhavnost* is a Russian term that refers to the Great Power ideology behind the actions of the Russian state and identity of the Russian people. This idea of Russian great power status has resonated into the idea that Russia must think and act like a great power with the privilege of involvement in matters deemed important to national interest. This

²⁹ J. Samuel Barkin, *Realist Constructivism: Rethinking International Relations Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010: 169.

³⁰ Rosalind Marsh, "The Nature of Russia's Identity: The Theme of "Russia and the West" in Post-Soviet Culture." *Nationalities Papers* 35.3 (2007): 562.

³¹ E. Wayne Merry, "Testimony: E. Wayne Merry." *CSCE*. (2007)

indispensability and its influence on Russian foreign policy will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

Realists have always regarded domestic politics and foreign policy as two distinct spheres of policy making, but history has shown that these spheres are not exclusive and have been more interconnected than previously thought. Contemporary international relations has recognized the increasingly vague distinction between domestic and international politics; therefore, it is important when analyzing foreign policy that international social conditions are not privileged over domestic conditions such as regime type, local economics, and other social interactions. International relations theory has traditionally developed research patterns that privilege either the system or country, but recently developed alternative constructivist theory, such as unit-level constructivism, has provided a evolved constructivist approach to include a states domestic political influences. Authors like James Rosenau argued that foreign policy shapes and determines domestic policy, while characteristics of domestic policy in turn produce foreign policy.³² Unit-level constructivist theory, represented in the works of scholars like Peter Katzenstien, emphasizes the focus on domestic factors in a states foreign policy, stressing “the relationship between domestic social legal norms and the identities and interests of states”.³³ This thesis will utilize this theory to analyze Russia’s decision to support the al-Assad regime beyond international determinants, addressing the various domestic factors that have influenced Russian foreign policy in Syria. In Chapter 4 of this thesis, internal factors

³² James N. Rosenau, *Linkage Politics: Essays on the Convergence of National and International Systems*. The Free Press, New York, 1969.

³³ Christian Reus-Smit, “Constructivism.” *Theories of International Relations*. 3rd ed. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillian, (2005): 199.

such as regime type, energy and oil, internal conflict and the rise of radical Islam, and the role of the Russian media will be analyzed, focusing on the how these internal factors have influenced Russia's policy to support the al-Assad regime.

The research conducted in the proposed thesis will employ two levels of analysis, which will provide a better understanding into the foreign policy of Russia and their decision to support the al-Assad regime during the Syrian Civil War. These levels of analysis are: state and systemic. At the state level of analysis, this research will examine the various domestic factors that help shape Russian foreign policy towards Syria. When addressing the state level, this thesis will focus on two areas: government, such as regime type, and society, such as the role of the media in shaping public opinions. The systemic level analysis will focus on the interstate affairs that are implemented through bilateral or multilateral negotiations both regionally and/or globally. This type of analysis will provide answers regarding the formation and implementation of Russian foreign policy by addressing two questions: “do states act the way they act in the world because of who they are (as defined within the state)” or “do states act the way they do because of where they sit in the world (as defined by their relationships with other states in the international system)”³⁴

³⁴ Laura Neack, *The New Foreign Policy: Power Seeking in a Globalized Era*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, (2008): 131.

Chapter 3: Russian Foreign Relations

After the fall of the Soviet Empire and the turbulence of Yeltsin's presidency, Vladimir Putin emerged with a new foreign policy focused on reestablishing Russia as a 'great power' among the international system and asserting its dominance amongst the former Soviet Republics. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia was faced with the massive challenge of developing a national identity in an environment of frequent political and economic turmoil. Kortunov argues that Russia adjusted their foreign policy after the fall of the Soviet Union from an ideological policy to a more pragmatic policy that emphasizes the following: geopolitics, the protection of Russians outside of Russia, and the use of strong tactics in different spheres of influence.³⁵ The goals of this new foreign policy were driven by an opposition to the West, specifically the United States, and to obtain a greater position for Russia on the international stage.

When discussing Russia's foreign policy, it is important to begin with a brief definition about what foreign policy represents, since this thesis is intended on providing an analysis of the formulation of Russian foreign policy-making towards the al-Assad regime in Syria. According to scholars, foreign policy is "the goals that officials representing states seek abroad, the values that underline those goals, and the means or instruments used to pursue them".³⁶ Putin has expanded the concept of Russian foreign policy to include an internal dimension, claiming that for Russia

³⁵ Sergei Kortunov and Andrei Kortunov. "From "moralism" to "pragmatics": New dimensions of Russian foreign policy". *Comparative Strategy*, 13:3, (1994): 261-276, DOI: 10.1080/01495939408402981.

³⁶ Charles W. Kegley and Eugene R. Wittkopf. *World Politics: Trend and Transformation*. 9th ed. Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, (2004).

“foreign policy is both an indicator and a determining factor for the condition of internal affairs”.³⁷ He stressed that the “competence, skill, and effectiveness with which we use our diplomatic resources determines not only the prestige of our country in the eyes of the world but also the political and economic situation inside Russia itself”.³⁸ This thesis will present Russia’s current foreign policy as that of a ‘sovereign democracy’³⁹ that limits the influence of international law, global economic and political bodies, and global public opinion on Russian domestic and foreign procedures. Russian sovereign democracy has two basic aspects: “the primacy of sovereignty over democracy and a sovereign Russian democratic institutional development which does not correspond to Western standards”.⁴⁰ While the concept of sovereign democracy may have its flaws and divide many regarding its application, the concept helps explain the managed and centralized political structure of the Russian government, which utilizes government control to prevent challenges to the corrupt, elitist system.

Prior to discussing Russia’s foreign policy, it is important to reference the main sources of influence that dominate Russia’s political and economic structure. Politically, Russia is dominated by an exclusive but internally competitive elite, lead by the president, who has complete constitutional authority over foreign policy. This constitutional power allows the president the authority to pass legislation without

³⁷ Igor S. Ivanov, *The New Russian Diplomacy*. Washington, D.C.: Nixon Center, (2002): 8-9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ A term coined by former Putin Chief of Staff Vladislav Surkov in 2006 as an attempt to explain the ideology of the Russian government system, as an alternative to ‘managed democracy’.

⁴⁰ Nikolai Petrov, “From Managed Democracy to Sovereign Democracy”. *PONARS Policy Memo No. 396*. (2005): 181-182.

consent from parliament, which has allowed Putin to return to a more authoritarian pattern of vertical power sharing politics. Economics are characterized by rent-seeking behavior, where privileged individuals and companies “seek returns from state-sponsored monopoly rights”.⁴¹ The elites whose interests are tied to economic success currently dominate Russia’s foreign policy-making, establishing a system that secures their power and control. This combination of influence facilitated the merging of economic and state power on Putin’s terms, reversing privatized assets considered most important to the state. This can be seen in Russia’s most successful and important sector of its economy: the energy sector, which will be discussed in Chapter 4. “Russia’s state dominated energy sector is now seen by many in the Kremlin as a foundation of the country’s power and an engine of economic growth and modernization”.⁴² It is necessary to display how political and economic governance influence foreign policy in order to fully understand how informal and uninstitutionalized foreign policy making can be. Scholars have emphasized “although a state’s external environment is important, we find that elite ideas could provide us with greater leverage in explaining change and continuity in foreign policy”.⁴³ This domestic framework that produces and influences Russia’s foreign policy has been labeled Putinism, which has been defined as a leadership style or regime type under the authoritative policies of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Putinsim in Russia has resulted in a single self-perpetuating regime since 1991, with

⁴¹ Robert B. Ekelund & Robert D. Tollison. *Mercantilism as a rent-seeking society* (Texas A&M University Press), (1981).

⁴² James Sherr, "Russia and The West: A Reassessment." *The Shrivenham Papers* 6, (2008).

⁴³ Giorgi Gvalia, Bidzina Lebanidze, & Zurab Iashvili, *Political Elites, Ideas, and Foreign Policy: Explaining and Understanding the International Behavior of Small States in the Former Soviet Union* (Tbilisi, Georgia: Ilia State University Press 2011): 35-36.

elections that act as a legitimating mechanism. It is through this centralized process of control that Putin and a select elites are able to monopolize the economic and political system in their interest.

This chapter will begin by analyzing the key determinants of Russian foreign policy, focusing on Russia's current ambitions, goals, and challenges. By addressing these goals, a foundation will be established for further analyzing Russia's foreign policy towards Syria. Russia's foreign policy goals are crucial in comprehending its approach to the international system and how it views itself among that system. This chapter will analyze the issue of Russian identity and its role in the formation of Russia's perceived 'great power' status. For Russia the issue of identity is key to understanding the source of Russia's perceived great power status. Finally, this chapter will analyze Russia's relations with the West, the Middle East, and Syria and will attempt to analyze how Russia's decision to back the al-Assad regime has affected those relationships and Russia's current status in the international system. By examining these relationships and how Russia's decision to support the al-Assad regime in Syria has influenced these relationships. This thesis will demonstrate how Russia's has utilized its position with Syria to maximize its power and influence in the Middle East and the international system.

3.2 Foreign Policy

Official Russian foreign policy is exhibited in the Foreign Policy Concept, a lasting strategic document approved by the president, which outlines Russia's views on the current state of international affairs, its major priorities, its threats, and its main

objectives. The document consists of five main sections: general provisions, foreign policy of the Russian Federation and the modern world, priorities of the Russian Federation in addressing global problems, regional priorities, and development and implementation of Russian foreign policy.⁴⁴ The current Foreign Policy Concept prioritizes issues such as building spheres of influence in the region and post-Soviet states, the importance of the role of the UN Security Council, strengthening Russia's economic and trade status, and the declining power of the United States, among others. Ultimately, the main goal of Russia's foreign policy is to ensure the protection of citizens', society's and the state's interests.

One of the key threats and priorities outlined in the concept is the issue of sovereignty and the use of force through interventions. The concept blatantly states that "it is unacceptable that military interventions...which undermine the foundations of international law based on the principle of sovereign equality of states, be carried out on the pretext of implementing the concept of "responsibility to protect" and that Russia strongly supports seeking "political and diplomatic solutions to regional conflicts through collective actions of the international community in strong belief that modern conflicts cannot be resolved through the use of force".⁴⁵ It is important to note that the 2013 concept was formulated during a time of Russian dissatisfaction with the 2008 invasion of Iraq, the 2011 invasion of Libya, and the current civil war in Syria. The document clearly states that a major threat to Russia is the use of unilateral sanctions and coercive methods outside of the UNSC structure. It is

⁴⁴ Russian Federation. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*. 2013.

<http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D>.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

obvious why Russia would defend the role of the UNSC, seeing how the forum is one of the only last resources left where Russia can be seen as an equal to the other parties, specifically the United States, and be seen as a major power.

While the document outlines challenges to the current foreign policy of Russia, the document emphasizes the future role of Russia in international affairs, promoting Russia as a great power amongst a changing geopolitical landscape. The current Foreign Policy Concept “places greater emphasis on the world’s ‘civilizational diversity’, competition over values and the negative impact of a ‘re-ideologization’ of international affairs”.⁴⁶ One of the most important aspects of the document is that it identifies the change in the international order, specifically the decrease of Western power, and emphasizes the increased role Russia will play in the future multipolar international system. Former Russian Prime Minister Evgeny Primakov formulated a foreign policy model structured around the idea of Russia heading a multipolar alliance of likeminded powers to contest what was viewed as the unipolar world being constructed by the United States. Prior documents argue for Russia to acquire a “standing position” amongst the international community, while the most current concept argues for a “strengthening position” that would help strengthen Russia’s status and power among in the international system.⁴⁷ Strength is a characteristic often utilized in Putin’s current foreign policy, which can be displayed through relationships that are based on hard power coercion and stressed relations with the United States and Europe.

⁴⁶ Andrew Monaghan, "The New Russian Foreign Policy Concept: Evolving Continuity." *Chatham House* (2013): 5-6.

⁴⁷ Russian Federation. Ministry of Foreign Affairs. *Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation*. 2013.
<http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/76389FEC168189ED44257B2E0039B16D>.

3.3 Russia's Foreign Policy Goals

Below are the main goals outlined in the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept signed by Putin. A deeper analysis of the goals reflects the strategic culture of the Russian Federation. The following goals demonstrate Russia's current view of the international system and reflect changes in Russia's foreign policy in an unstable strategic environment. The goals outlined in this document provide the foundation for how Russia approaches its international and regional priorities, threats, and opportunities; therefore, it is necessary to highlight Russia's main foreign policy goals prior to discussing its policy towards Syria, the rest of the Middle East, and the West. While each of these stated goals apply to Russia's entire foreign policy, these goals provide Russia with its official discourse to justify its actions in defending the al-Assad regime in Syria. Overall, these goal provide an insight into the building of Russian foreign policy making, helping one further understand Russia's justifications for its decisions and actions.

1) The first goal outlined in the Russian Foreign Policy Concept is to ensure "the security of the country, protecting and strengthening its sovereignty and territorial integrity, and securing its high standing in the international community as one of the influential and competitive poles of the modern world".⁴⁸ This first goal is geared toward the concept of a sovereign state, whose main goal is the protection of its people and to assure its own survival. This goal is focused on the internal and

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

external strengthening of Russia, hoping to secure its spot as a multiregional pole of power. One of Russia's main ambitions is to increase its international posture in an attempt to further its status as a great power both internationally and regionally. Russia's status as a nuclear superpower, its position in the UNSC, and its vast quantities of natural resources only strengthens Russia's position in the international system.

2) The second goal is related to Russia's economy, focusing on the creation of "favorable external conditions for a steady and dynamic growth of the Russian economy" and "strengthening Russia's positions in the global trade and economic system".⁴⁹ This goal has been highlighted in the concept because the Kremlin recognizes that external activities influence the internal development of Russia's economy. For Russia, the country with the largest natural gas reserves, the creation of favorable conditions and its success in the global economic system are fueled almost entirely through Russia's energy sector. Russia has utilized its oil and natural gas to thwart domestic economic ruin and extend Russia's economic influence internationally. Ultimately, this goal is extremely important for both Russian foreign and domestic policy because economic success would allow Russia to advance its status in the international system while pursuing its national interests.

3) The third goal is the "active promoting of international peace and universal security and stability for the purpose of establishing a just and democratic system of

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

international relations based on collective decision-making in addressing global issues, on the primacy of international law, including, first of all, the UN Charter, as well as on equal, partnership relations among nations with the central coordinating role of the UN as the principal organization regulating international relations”.⁵⁰ Russia has expressed its opinion on the role of the UNSC as the main source for collective solutions to international crises, advocating for the legality of the UN Charter and its role in international law. Russia’s support for the role of the UN is due to its permanent seat in the UNSC and its right to veto, which it has utilized in defending the al-Assad regime against any form of international pressure on the regime. “It was therefore natural for Russia to insist on the UNSC’s continuing role in international dispute settlement, because this forum was one of the few where it could aspire to a rough equality with the United States as well as claim major power status by ‘right’ and precedent”.⁵¹ Russia has expressed its dissatisfaction with the U.S. policy of unilaterally handling issues outside the auspices of the UNSC, where Russia is able to wield its power as an equal.

4) The fourth stated goal in Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept is to promote “good-neighborly relations with adjoining states and helping to overcome existing and prevent potential tensions and conflicts in regions adjacent to the Russian Federation”.⁵² Since the disintegration from the Soviet Union and the current spread of radical Islam in its region, Russia has been very active and interested in the state of

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

⁵¹ Bobo Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion, and Mythmaking*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan (2002): 88.

⁵² *Ibid.*

affairs of its neighbors in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Middle East. In the region, Russia has involved itself in many conflicts, like those in Georgia and Ukraine, recognizing that Russia's security and economic development depend on stability in the region. In the case of Syria, Russia has been extremely vocal of fears of the spread of radical Islam among the opposition groups opposing the al-Assad regime in the region, which will be discussed in Chapter 4. For Russia, regional stability is key for maintaining its policies while attempting to strengthen its position and influence both regionally and beyond.

5) The fifth goal is to develop “mutually beneficial and equal bilateral and multilateral partnership relations with foreign states, interstate associations, international organizations and forums on the basis of respect for independence and sovereignty, pragmatism, transparency, multi-vector approach, predictability and non-confrontational protection of national interests”.⁵³ Regionally, Russia has utilized its role as a major power through many such organizations as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the CIS, and the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsec), where in such organizations Russia has utilized its international status to take on more of a hegemonic role. Internationally, Russia has utilized organizations such as the UN, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and until most recently the G8, which has suspended Russia's membership indefinitely due to its actions in the Russian annexation of the Crimea, as tool to defend its interests and power status globally.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Russia has utilized these organizations to position itself “as the champion of multilateralism”, which has “offered it the opportunity to present itself as a leading light in an alternative consensus, one that challenged both the primacy of the United States and the moral universalism of Western values”.⁵⁴

6) The sixth goal is a permanent goal to ensure the “comprehensive protection of rights and legitimate interests of Russian citizens and compatriots residing abroad” while “promoting the Russian language and strengthening its positions in the world”.⁵⁵ After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, it was estimated that some 20 million ethnic Russian were residing outside of Russia throughout the region.⁵⁶ Russia’s most recent foreign policy in Ukraine has displayed that it is willing to use whatever tools necessary to defend ethnic Russian’s rights and interests abroad. In 2009, changes were made to Russia’s Law of Defense, establishing a long range of conditions that allow for Russia to unilaterally defend its citizens and Russian speakers in other countries.⁵⁷ Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has claimed that tens of thousands of Russian citizens are living in Syria, which given Russia’s current foreign policy of protecting its citizens abroad, may be something they cannot or will not ignore.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Bobo Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion, and Mythmaking*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan (2002): 89.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Francisco J. Gonzalez, "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation: A Comparative Study." *Instituto Español De Estudios Estratégicos (IEEE) (Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies)* 06 (2013).

⁵⁷ Janusz Bugajski, *Georgian Lessons: Conflicting Russian and Western Interests in the Wider Europe*. Washington, D.C.: CSIS. (2010).

⁵⁸ Roy Allison, *Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis*. Malden, MA: International Affairs 89:4 (2013): 804.

7) The final goal is to facilitate “the development of a constructive dialogue and partnership relations between civilizations in the interests of enhancing accord among various cultures and confessions and ensuring their mutual enrichment”.⁵⁹ This goal is related to more of a soft power approach of promoting language and culture, which Russia utilizes in its region, uniting many under the commonality of the Russian language and the Russian Orthodox Church. For many Russians, references to encouraging dialogue among civilizations has been challenged internally and externally in the region by the spread of Islamic radicalism, which will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

As displayed above, Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept is a thorough outline and description of Russia’s foreign goals and objectives. The document forms the basis of the Russian governments agenda and approach to the international system. Overall, the Foreign Policy Concept displays that Russian foreign policy is driven by goals meant to strengthen and secure Russia’s international status, which will enable Russia to (1) pursue and secure its future interests and (2) preserve the growth and relatively peaceful security environment its has recently experienced. For Russia, economic growth and success are the keys to sustaining Russia’s interests both internationally and domestically. The goals outlined above are extremely important in analyzing Russia’s general foreign policy, which is necessary to further examine Russia’s foreign policy towards Syria and its support for the al-Assad regime. For

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

Russia, a major determinant of foreign policy-making and the foreign policy goals pursued by the Kremlin is the role of identity. The historical legacy of Russia's empire and its Soviet superpower status has had its effect on shaping Russia's identity, its goals, and how it sees itself in the future. The next section of this chapter will examine how identity has factored into Russian foreign policy and Russia's goal of great power status.

3.4 Russian Identity

Questions regarding Russia's foreign policy have resulted in a perpetual debate regarding Russia's identity and its role in geopolitics, such as: are Russians Slavic, European, or Eurasian? Huntington emphasized the importance of culture and its role as the dominating source of conflict, arguing that international politics would develop into two categories: the West versus the Rest.⁶⁰ Is Russia a part of the West or part of the Rest? Neumann states that the activity of delineating a Western 'other' from the Russian 'self' has helped influence the formation of the Russian identity.⁶¹ This debate regarding Russian identity and their affinity with the West has shaped Russia's political and social mindset influencing its perceived power status and ultimately its foreign policy. "One of the keys roles of Russian foreign policy has been to define how Russians (and others) perceive Russia, with the hope that Russian foreign policy "will help Russia become Russia".⁶² This section will focus on the

⁶⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72.3 (1993): 22-49.

⁶¹ Iver B. Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe: A Study in Identity and International Relations*. London: Routledge, (1996).

⁶² Vladimir Lukin, quoted in James Richter. "Russian Foreign Policy and the Politics of National Identity" in Wallander. *The Sources of Russian Foreign Policy*, 69.

connection that exists between Russia's identity, its national interests, and ambition as a major international power.

Russia as a nation-state has only existed since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Before the break-up of the USSR, Russia was a multi-national empire that behaved and identified as such. Scholars have examined the role of Russia's historical legacy as a great power and its impact on Russia's contemporary great power mindset, arguing that "Russia's history and the way in which that history has shaped Russia's outlook helps us understand the way in which it approaches problems like those posed by Syria's civil war".⁶³ Since the mid-1990s, Russia has experienced a renewal of Russian nationalism that can be credited to the failure of Russia's economic market reforms and the failure of democratic politics to focus on issues of ethnicity. One of the main components of "contemporary Russian culture has been the traditional messianic view that Russia is a unique country which must pursue its own path of development that is necessarily different from that of the West, and will have a special, distinctive role to play in the future".⁶⁴ From this perspective, Russia has been able to pick from which aspects of the West it wishes to adopt and discard concepts it does not find favorable for its national interests. For Russians, their view of the West and Western culture are used to explore and strengthen their own country, which will always remains their greatest priority.

By focusing on social matters such as ideas, agency, and norms, constructivist theory provides an approach to analyzing Russia's foreign policy that emphasizes the

⁶³ Victor Kattan, "The Destiny of Great Power: Russian Messianism and the Quest for a Balance of Power in International Law and Relations." *Social & Legal Studies* 23.457 (2014).

⁶⁴ Rosalind Marsh, "The Nature of Russia's Identity: The Theme of "Russia and the West" in Post-Soviet Culture." *Nationalities Papers* 35.3, (2007): 555-78.

inter-subjective shared ideas that influence behavior and establish the identities and interests of actors.⁶⁵ Internal and external state identities are institutionalized on domestic and international levels, influenced by various domestic and international factors. At the domestic level, identities are developed alongside myths, traditions, and institutions to protect them.⁶⁶ At the international level, “states seek to enact their identities in interstate normative structures, including regimes and security communities”.⁶⁷ Russian self-perception is that of a nation that has reclaimed its strength and has fully recuperated from the systemic collapse of the 1990s. Russia has emerged with an identity that no longer identifies itself in terms of Western or European, but has instead sought to restore Russia’s natural identity. Characteristics of this identity include “a strong and centralized authoritative state in Moscow, social protections for the population, secure sovereign borders, and, consequently, engagement with Western hegemony on a strictly selective basis”.⁶⁸ This identity includes what scholars have labeled the ‘imperial syndrome’, which is credited to the sense of a past empire, while bolstering the current and future Russian policy in its entitled imperial mission.⁶⁹ “The national identity goals of Russian foreign policy can be summarized simply by two basic interests: to be recognized as first among equals

⁶⁵ Yucel Bozdaglioglu, *Constructivism and Identity Formation: An Alternative Approach*. USAK 3.11 (International Strategic Research Organization). (2007): 121-122.

⁶⁶ Glenn Chafetz, “The Struggle for a National Identity in Post-Soviet Russia.” *Political Science Quarterly* 111.4 (1996): 661-688.

⁶⁷ Ron Jepperson, Alexander Wendt, and Peter J. Katzenstein, “Norms, Identity, and Culture in National Security.” *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Katzenstein. New York: Columbia University Press, (1996): 62.

⁶⁸ Ted Hopf, “Russia's Place in the World.” *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* 79 (2009): 4-5.

⁶⁹ Bobo Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion, and Mythmaking*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan (2002): 48.

among the post-Soviet states, and to maintain its status as a great power in the world at large”.⁷⁰

A major aspect of Russia’s global status as a great power is its perceived notion of indispensability among the international community. This perceived notion has two very important aspects for how Russia view’s its global status and participates in world events. First, it assumes Russia is entitled to belong to every major international organization. This is an extremely important because “while NATO is gradually turning into the central element in the overall organization of the European political space, Russia is denied access to this structure”.⁷¹ Second, it assumes that solutions cannot be found to major international problems without Russian participation. “This would involve Moscow moderating Washington’s ‘excessive and not always wisely used might by, among other things, playing the role of mediator and alternative diplomatic and political centre’ - an aim which, it was claimed, other powers (for example, France and China) desired it to play and which was crucial to Russia’s continuing identity as a ‘great power’”.⁷² Overall, Russia views itself as a power indispensable to the international system and expects to be treated as such.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new era of international politics emerged in which struggles for multi-polarity have been shaped by those defending the status-quo and others hoping to revise the structure of the international system.

⁷⁰ Paul D’Anieri, "Russian Foreign Policy: Continuity, Revolution, and the Search for Status." *Foreign Policy in Comparative Perspective: Domestic and International Influences on State Behavior*. Washington, D.C.: CQ, (2002):108.

⁷¹Vladimir Baranovsky, "Russia: A Part of Europe or Apart from Europe?" *International Affairs* 76.3 (2000): 450.

⁷²Bobo Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion, and Mythmaking*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan (2002): 107.

Russia has attempted to re-establish itself as a pole of power separate from the West as a means of advancing its great power identity. Russia's foreign policy has been to re-establish and promote a strong Russia, shaped by identity politics. Russia has utilized its relationships with many countries to bolster its power status and separate itself as a distinct power. The following section will focus on Russia's key relationships that have been significant to its goal of achieving great power status, specifically in regards to the current crisis in Syria. For Russia, its support for the al-Assad regime has both hindered and advanced its goals of great power status. By examining how Russia's decision to support the al-Assad regime has affected its status and relationships among select nations involved, the following section will display how Russia has utilized its support for the Syrian regime in an attempt at self-perceived great power status through its foreign policy.

3.5 Russian Relations with the West

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia was forced to adapt to the collapse of their political, economic, and military systems, which helped undermine confidence and trust in the idea of liberalization. The overall collapse of the state and the failure of shock therapy and Western investment left Russia alienated, with a populace that felt the strategic partnership with the West was not beneficial to Russia. Eventually the economy stabilized but the adverse side effects drove the elites and the general public to develop "resentment toward Western nations, particularly the

United States”.⁷³ Tsygankov states that for Russia the West “played an especially prominent role in creating for Russia the system of meanings in which to defend international choices” whose “influences were to be emulated or contained, but never ignored”.⁷⁴ While defending Russian interest globally, Putin’s policy has been able to frame some of Russia’s interests to be compatible with Western values, as means of advancing Russia’s influence and power status in the international system. The following portions of this section will examine Russia’s relations with the United States and Europe, focusing on how Russia utilized these relationships to expand its influence and power amongst the international community. The issue of Russia’s support for the al-Assad will also be addressed, examining how Russia’s decision to support the Syrian regime has affected those relationships.

Russian Relations with the United States

After the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001, Russia joined the U.S. ‘war on terror’, making Russia an extremely important ally to the West, but interest and relations between the two countries would not stay parallel. Many scholars apply a more antagonistic approach for explaining Russian foreign policy towards the United States, while other scholars argue that Russia’s relationship with the US is one of competition, with Russian foreign policy aimed at a “plan to rebuild Russia as a great power with a global reach”.⁷⁵ Lo argues that Russian foreign policy is

⁷³ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, (2010): 24.

⁷⁴ Andrei P. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, (2010): 2.

⁷⁵ Dmitri Trenin, *The Mythical Alliance: Russia's Syria Policy*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (2013).

overwhelmingly Westerncentric, although not pro-Western, because “there was no significant area of international affairs where Washington did not play a leading role”.⁷⁶ “Fueled in part by the massive inflow of petro-dollars, Moscow’s self-confidence grew over the several years prior to the late 2008 global economic downturn, and officials and observers in Europe and the United States expressed growing concern about what they viewed as an increasingly contrarian Russian foreign policy”.⁷⁷ This can be observed in Russia’s opposition to a US defense missile system in Europe, its opposition of Ukrainian and Georgian NATO membership, along with opposing Ukrainian EU membership, and its support for regimes that oppose American influence such as China and Iran. In many international disputes, Russian foreign policy has been to promote conflicts between the U.S. and its allies as an attempt to weaken U.S. power globally, as in Syria. While the United States and Russia do share some of the same goals and interests, ultimately, Russian relations with the U.S. have soured due to Moscow’s fears that U.S. policies challenge Russia’s power and indispensability. Putin’s policy has been to restore Russia’s place among the multipolar world as a great power and an equal amongst the United States.

A major point of contention between Russia and the United States has been Russia’s stance regarding NATO: its exclusion from the organization, NATO’s continued post-Cold War expansion, and its lack of trust for past NATO operations. To the West, NATO has been deemed a powerful, symbolic, and irreplaceable security community, which the United States utilizes to circumvent the UN in matters

⁷⁶ Bobo Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion, and Mythmaking*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan (2002): 95.

⁷⁷ United States. Cong. *Russian Political, Economic, and Security Issues and U.S. Interests*. By Jim Nichol. Cong. Rept. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, (2014): 38-39.

of Western interests. For Russia, a major problem with NATO lies in Russia's exclusion from attaining membership, where NATO has become "an organization whose essential identity and history is correctly understood as one of cultural, or even civilizational commonality centered around the shared democratic foundations of its members", which has left Russia as an outsider unable to yield influence in a major security structure that continues to strengthen US and European relations.⁷⁸ Williams and Neumann claim that NATO and its further expansion forced the Russian leadership to choose between two paths, arguing "Russia could either be an apprentice striving to join Western civilization, thus entailing an acceptance of NATO enlargement as inevitable or positive; or, alternatively, Russia could be a counter-civilizational force, entailing opposition to NATO enlargement".⁷⁹ This option to oppose NATO has resulted in continued post-Cold War great power politics, leaving Russia engaged in a theater of strategic conflict with the West, while supporting regimes like Assad in an attempt to counter American hegemony.

The relationship between Russia and the United States has been riddled with contention as both countries vie for power in the global arena, where Russia has supported the possibility of a more multipolar world. Putin has blamed the lack of cooperation between the US and Russia because "the United States continued to view itself as the sole superpower", which acts with an "imperial attitude", that has only strengthened the "fundamental cultural differences" between the two countries.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Michael C. Williams and Iver B. Neumann. "From Alliance to Security Community: NATO, Russia, and the Power of Identity." *Millennium - Journal of International Studies* 29.2 (2000): 357-87.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ United States. Cong. *Russian Political, Economic, and Security Issues and U.S. Interests*. By Jim Nichol. Cong. Rept. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, (2014): 55.

Putin recently argued that the United States' policy has been to ignore international law, choosing a policy "by the rule of the gun", where the U.S. either forces approval from international organizations for its acts or ignores them.⁸¹ Charap argues "Russia's stance on the international action on the Syrian crisis has more to do with anxieties about the implications of US power than it does with Syria itself".⁸² In the case of Syria, the US-led coalition against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has been condemned by the Russian government due to its lack of UN approval and its violation of Syrian sovereignty (which will be discussed in Chapter 4). Russia's decision to back the al-Assad regime and its current annexation of Ukrainian land, resulting in economic sanctions against Russia, has further worsened the relationships between the US and Russia.

Russian Relations with Europe

Europe plays a central role to Russia's economy, with the EU being Russia's largest trading partner, but this relationship is mutual, as Russia is the EU's third largest trading partner. In Russia's most important economic sector, its energy sector, Europe is irreplaceably significant, since Russia is the largest exporter of oil and natural gas to the European Union. "Russian leaders do not view the EU as a major strategic power but as a valuable twofold instrument: an economic engine from where Russia can tap investment, technology, and trade; and a U.S. partner that Moscow can help decouple and maximize its own influence to decrease the American role in

⁸¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. *Vladimir Putin Addressed States Duma deputies, Federation Council Members, Heads of Russian Regions and Civil Society Representatives in the Kremlin*, March 18, 2014.

⁸² Samuel Charap, "Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention." *Survival* 55.1 (2013): 37.

Europe”.⁸³ The significance behind Russia’s energy interdependence with Europe, even amidst sanctions against Russia due to its actions in with Ukraine, may present tension between Europe and the US. “Some Members of Congress, U.S. officials, and European leaders have claimed that European dependence on Russian energy and Russia’s growing influence in segments of Europe’s energy distribution infrastructure poses a long-term threat to transatlantic relations”.⁸⁴

Russia’s strategy towards the EU can be viewed under three major positions. The first position pursues direct relations with the EU, not as a member or potential member, but as an equal partner. The second position focuses on bilateral ties with major EU states that are more likely to offer more favorable accommodations to Russia. While Russia does cooperate with EU institutions, it prefers to collaborate with individual states to pursue Russia’s economic and political interests. The third position views the EU as a competitor, both regionally and internationally, which is capable of attracting post-Soviet states away from Moscow’s influence. Bugajski claims that “it’s emphasis on human rights and pluralistic democracy, the EU also threatens the Kremlin’s sovereign democracy model and even the long-term survival of the Russian Federation”.⁸⁵

The relationship between Russia and Europe is constantly affected by the political and economic environment of the continent, which has most recently been influenced by Russia’s invasion of the Crimea in Ukraine. Russia’s actions in the

⁸³ Janusz Bugajski, *Georgian Lessons: Conflicting Russian and Western Interests in the Wider Europe*. Washington, D.C.: CSIS. (2010): 99.

⁸⁴ United States. Cong. *Russian Political, Economic, and Security Issues and U.S. Interests*. By Jim Nichol. Cong. Rept. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, (2014): 35-36.

⁸⁵ Janusz Bugajski, *Georgian Lessons: Conflicting Russian and Western Interests in the Wider Europe*. Washington, D.C.: CSIS. (2010): 99-100.

Crimea have left uncertainty over Russia's intentions in Europe, with European politicians viewing Russia more as a potential threat than a partner. Most recently, the US and many European countries have imposed harsh economic and financial sanctions in response to Russia's annexation of the Crimea, which has affected the Russian stock index and has caused depreciation in the Russian Ruble. Russia's policy towards the Crimea, sanctions against Russia, and economic dependence between European countries and Russia has resulted in a split between those European countries that treat Russia with pragmatism and engagement and those that treat Russia as a threat. While Russia has sought to extend its power and influence in the region, "a game-changing narrative has therefore emerged of Putin's Russia as a threat to peace and stability in Europe, and as an adversarial power that flouts European principles and values".⁸⁶

Compared to the United States, the EU and its member states have not played a substantial role in the Syrian crisis, but has provided the Syrian opposition with support against the regime. Along with support for the anti-regime opposition, the EU has implemented sanctions against the al-Assad regime. The sanctions encompass over 17 restrictive measures aimed at pressuring the Syrian regime, causing considerable damage to the Syrian economy.⁸⁷ Russia has managed to provide the Syrian regime with financial and military support despite international sanctions against the regime, but it is undeniable that international sanctions against the regime have hindered the regimes revenues while further isolating the regime from the

⁸⁶ United States. Cong. *Russian Political, Economic, and Security Issues and U.S. Interests*. By Jim Nichol. Cong. Rept. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, (2014): 40-41.

⁸⁷ Carla Portela, "The EU Sanctions Operation in Syria: Conflict Management by Other Means". *UNISCI Discussion Papers* 0.30 (2014): 153.

international community. While EU-Russian relations are vital due to economic and energy significance, European sanctions against the al-Assad regime have strained EU-Russian relations. Many European leaders have called for pressure to instigate Assad's departure, which has only polarized Russian-European relations further. This pressure has been compounded by the Russian annexation of the Crimea in Ukraine and European sanctions against the Russian Federation. Ultimately, disagreements regarding the Syrian Civil War has potential to further debilitate relations between Europe and Russia depending on the future status of Syria's regional security and the future of the al-Assad regime.

3.6 Russian Relations with the Middle East

Russia's renewed interest in the Middle East has been a result of major global and regional developments, such as the events of the Arab Spring. In an effort to upgrade its international status and power, Russia has been playing a more active role in events in the Middle East in an attempt to restore its status as an influential regional actor. Nichol argues that Russia's "role in the Iranian sanctions agreement, the Middle East Quartet, the International Conference on Syria, chemical weapons removal from Syria, and other Middle Eastern issues have led some observers to speak of "Russia's return" to the region, although most argue that Russia's moves are mainly diplomatic and reflect limited capabilities and interests".⁸⁸ Russia's strategic interests in the Middle East include security of its southern border, decreasing influence of the United States, and preventing competition from Gulf States in

⁸⁸ United States. Cong. *Russian Political, Economic, and Security Issues and U.S. Interests*. By Jim Nichol. Cong. Rept. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, (2014): 60.

European and Asian energy markets. Russia's increased involvement in the Middle East has not signaled the formation of a coherent policy in the region, but is formulated instead as a reaction to US policy or an attempt to weaken American influence in the region. While the US maintains the dominant power in the Middle East, democratization of many Arab states have conflicted, rather than assist, Western geopolitical interests in the region. Countries like Russia and China have utilized the declining Western influence through pragmatic relations that has provided alternatives to Western interests. Russian and Chinese support for the al-Assad regime in the UNSC has undermined Western interests in the region, allowing Russia to position itself as a growing regional power.

While Russia has managed to maintain various relationships with countries in the Middle East, Russia's decision to back the al-Assad regime has provoked reactions from many countries in the region, which have included protests at Russian embassies in countries such as Libya and Lebanon. Among the states in the Middle East, six states have opposed the al-Assad regime and Russian support for the regime: Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan, Libya, Qatar, and Egypt, but international and regional attention has temporarily shifted from Assad to the rise of the Islamic State (IS), a jihadist militant group in Syria and Iraq. The majority of states in the Middle East have joined the U.S.-led coalition against the threat posed by the terrorist state, which has turned attention even further away from the conflict between opposition groups in Syria and the regime. It is important to note that while the majority of the states in the Middle East do not support the rise of IS, some states did play a supporting role in economic and military funding to Syrian opposition groups prior to the formation.

External funding to the Syrian opposition has affected Russian relations with various countries due to their additional support of terrorist activities during and after the First and Second Chechen Wars. Charap argues that “decision-makers in Moscow are quick to point out that the emirate and its predecessors were directly supported by entities in some of the Arab countries now leading the call for Assad’s departure”.⁸⁹

The following portion will examine the relationships between Russia and key states in the Middle East, focusing on how Russia’s decision to support the al-Assad regime has either hindered or helped Russian influence and relations in the region. Select countries were chosen due to their relationships with Russia and their involvement in the Syrian Civil War.

The conflict in Syria has had an impact on relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia. Russia has accused Saudi Arabia, along with the US and other countries in the Gulf, of provoking the events of the crisis in Syria. During the beginning of the conflict, Saudi Arabia provided economic and military assistance to various opposition factions fighting the al-Assad regime, which resulted in further fragmentation of opposition forces. Together with Qatar, Saudi has attempted to weaken Iranian-Syrian relations through support for the Syrian opposition and suspending Syria’s membership in the Arab League. In addition to funding opposition forces in Syria, Saudi has been vocal about its desire for increased pressure on Assad, while encouraging the US to have a more active presence in the conflict. Saudi’s assistance to the Syrian opposition has worsened Russian-Saudi relations as Russia views Saudi’s attempt at funding opposition groups as supporting Islamic radicalism

⁸⁹ Samuel Charap, "Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention." *Survival* 55.1 (2013): 36.

in the region. This mindset is reminiscent of the First and Second Chechen Wars, when Russia accused Saudi Arabia of supporting Chechen terrorists and the spread of radical Islam in the Caucasus Emirate. Both countries have been on opposite sides regarding their support for Iran and its nuclear program. Overall, the current situation in Syria has worsened relations between Russia and Saudi Arabia, further dividing the region as both countries attempt to increase their influence through their involvement in the crisis.

Russia is Turkey's second largest trading partner, with a strong, growing economic partnership in energy cooperation. Despite disagreements regarding the conflict in Syria, Russia and Turkey have been able to continue and accomplish new developments regarding economic interests, such as the Turkish Stream, a proposed gas pipeline that would bring natural gas from Russia to Turkey. Politically, tensions between the two countries have grown as both Russia and Turkey vie for influence and power in the same regions. Russian-Turkish relations have worsened due to Russia's support for the al-Assad regime, while Turkey has been adamant about calling for the fall of the regime. Kunchins claims that Russian support for the regime and Turkish support for the Syrian opposition has "exposed fundamental differences in interests and policies between Ankara and Moscow, with Turkey siding with the forces of political change in the Middle East while Russia seeks to uphold the status quo".⁹⁰ As the international community focuses on the threat posed by ISIS in the region, Turkey continues to demand that action be taken against the Syrian regime in exchange for future Turkish cooperation in the US-led coalition against the Islamic

⁹⁰ Stephen J. Flanagan, "The Turkey-Russia-Iran Nexus: Eurasian Power Dynamics." *CSIS: Center for Strategic & International Studies* (2013): 13.

State. As the conflict intensifies in the region, the different policies regarding the regime in Syria has challenged the relationship between Turkey and Russia. While both countries continue to disagree regarding the conflict in Syria, the main focus between Turkey and Russia has been their bilateral economic interests, which are too significant to be disrupted over their disagreements regarding Syria.

For over three decades, Syria and Iran have shared an alliance that has been an important presence for the changing political landscape of the Middle East. The relationship that has existed between the two countries has been based on defensive policies of protection against Western, Israeli, and Iraqi offensive strategies in the region. Syrian-Iranian relations have been strengthened by the inclusion of an strong ally to both nations, Russia, which Alexey Malashenko claims has been labeled a new “axis of evil” consisting of Iran, Russia, and Syria”.⁹¹ Relations between Iran and Russia have been crucial to assisting the al-Assad regimes survival despite international pressure. Both Russia and Iran have provided the regime with the majority of its external military and financial assistance, while Russia has also provided the regime with international protection through its vote in the UN Security Council. Overall, support for the Syrian regime has not only facilitated Iranian and Russian economic and military interests, but has also provided an alliance that has stood against Western intervention in the Middle East in an attempt to decrease American hegemony in the region. Ultimately, the relationship between Russian and Iran has been a major supporting force behind Syrian sovereignty and the al-Assad regimes survival.

⁹¹ Alexey Malashenko, "Russia's Policy in the Middle East and the Fight Against Extremism." *POMEAS Policy Brief* 3 (2014): 4.

For Russia, the most important challenge in the Middle East is fate of the al-Assad regime and the current exacerbation of events in the crisis in Syria, which could weaken Russia's policy and influence in the region. The current instability in the Middle East has allowed Moscow to utilize its regional power as a key player in averting American policy in the region. Russia's policy in the Middle East can be observed as a reaction to the challenge of competition between the US and Russia in various arenas, such as the issue of Syria and IS in the Middle East and the issue of Ukraine in East Europe. For the first time since the end of the Cold War, Russia's dedicated political support for the al-Assad regime in Syria has permitted Russia to influentially project its power in the Middle East. While Russian support for the al-Assad regime has not affected its economic relationships with countries in the Middle East, strategically, Russia's support for the regime has been viewed as an attempt at suppression of radical Sunni influence in the region, affecting its relationships with many states in the Middle East.

3.7 Russian Relations with Syria

Since the beginning of the ongoing civil war in Syria, Russia has strongly supported the al-Assad regime, becoming its primary protector among the international community. Russian interests in Syria have always been strategic in nature, but the current instability in the Middle East has made Russian foreign policy in the region more sensitive to secure and defend these interests. Russia has utilized its relationship with the 'unpopular' regime as greater attempt at expanding Russian power and influence while challenging American geopolitical advances. Russia's

support for the regime has been justified under principles of international law, such as defending the sovereignty of states and the principle of non-intervention in states internal affairs, which will be discussed in Chapter 4. While Russia has employed many relationships with ‘rogue’ nations in the Middle East as an attempt at gaining influence in countries that oppose Western policies, few states in Middle East are free from American influence. Syria has provided Russia with advantages independent from American control, such as access to the Mediterranean and a position of influence in the Middle East. For Russia, its strong relationship with the al-Assad regime allows Russia to play a more active role in the Middle East and restores Russia’s status in the regional as a powerful actor.

Russian economic and military interests with Syria should not be overestimated as the main motivation behind Putin’s support for the al-Assad regime. Scholars have focused on the economic partnership between the two countries as a major factor behind the support given between each country, but it is important to note that Russia and Syria are not major trading partners; therefore, analyzing their relationship based on economic interests does not provide a sufficient explanation.

⁹²Scholars have also focused on Russian interest in the Mediterranean military base in Tartus, but Russia’s interest in the port is more symbolic than strategic.⁹³ A Russian military presence in the Middle East is unrealistic and the Russian government has made no effort to develop such presence. Russia’s policy towards Syria cannot be understood if reduced to mere arguments of interests; instead, Russian foreign policy

⁹² Azuolas Bagdonas, "Russia's Interests in the Syrian Conflict: Power, Prestige, and Profit." *European Journal of Economic and Political Science* 5.2 (2012): 63-66.

⁹³ Nicholas Kosturos, *What Drives Russia’s Unrelenting Position on Syria?* Center for American Progress, (2012): 1-3.

towards Syria can be viewed as part of an actor-centered process geared towards power expansion and Western opposition that is influenced by various internal factors, which will be discussed in Chapter 4. While economic factors may not be the driving force behind support for the regime, it is impossible to exclude these factors as having some influence over Russian foreign policy. Arms delivery contracts have played an economic and strategic role in strengthening cooperation between the two countries, while militarily supporting the regime and signaling to the West that sanctions would not prevent trade between the states.

Scholars have focused on the historical relationships between Syria and Russia, focusing on a continuation of relations, but this historical bond is purely symbolic due to the different dimensions that constitute the current relations.⁹⁴ Soviet-Syrian relations were more instrumental in nature, focusing not on identity or ideology, without the historical affinity utilized in the countries contemporary diplomacy. Scholars have argued “it is plausible that the close association between the USSR and Syria has some continuing resonance in the mindset of Russia’s current security and foreign policy leadership, generating a sense of solidarity”.⁹⁵ After the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia was forced to retreat from its international obligations and experienced a sort of ‘thaw’ in relations with the majority of states in the Middle East, but Putin has preserved and strengthened many aspects of previous Soviet-Syrian relations in order to establish Russia’s influence in the region.

⁹⁴ Talal Nizameddin, "Russia and Syria." *Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper* 12.05 (2012): 7-8.

⁹⁵ Roy Allison, *Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment with a Regime in Crisis*. Malden, MA: International Affairs 89:4 (2013): 801.

At a regional level, factors influencing Russian policy towards Syria are based on concerns of regional instability. Since the beginning of the uprising in Syria, both the al-Assad regime and the Russian government warned of the growing extremist threat that existed amongst some of the Syrian opposition groups. For Russia, the Syrian regimes removal would allow for the more radical opposition groups to fill the power vacuum from the regime. Putin has warned of the potential expansion of the radical movement from Syria into regions of Russia, specifically the Caucasus, which will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

One of the most important issues regarding Russian involvement in Syria has been the negotiation for the removal of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal. In August 2014, chemical agents were used in an area outside of Damascus, controlled by opposition forces, killing hundreds of civilians. The attack quickly became one of the most important events of the Syrian Civil War, leaving the international community divided on whom to place blame. Many Western and Arab governments have blamed the al-Assad regime, which has been blamed on multiple occasions throughout the crisis of other chemical weapons attacks against opposition forces and civilians, while the Russian government blamed the opposition forces, stating that the attacks were used to facilitate external intervention in the crisis. The attacks in Syria crossed the Obama administrations 'red line', which left the president suggesting a military response as a result of the attacks, the potential for future use of chemical weapons, and the potential of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal falling into the hands of the opposition forces. In a successful maneuver to avert any retaliatory military responses against the regime, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov presented a diplomatic

solution that would establish international control over Syria's chemical weapons arsenal while avoiding strikes or external intervention in the crisis.

The proposal signals one of the most important successful negotiations during the Syrian Civil War. With the help of the Russian government, the Syrian regime was able to satisfy the international community through the process of declaring, forfeiting, and destructing their chemical weapons arsenal. The proposal also demanded and succeeded in facilitating Syria's accession to the Chemical Weapons Convention, which requires all members to eliminate their chemical weapons stockpiles and facilities. The Russian government utilized its positions as Assad's main ally to bring about an agreement that would prevent any military action against the Syrian regime, all the while increasing Russia's role as a major power in the conflict. Without Russia's successful proposal and the US-Russian initiative for removing Syria's chemical weapons, one the most important issues surrounding the civil war could have gone unresolved, escalating into strikes against the regime. Putin has been eager to mediate negotiations and resolutions to issues regarding Syria and the al-Assad regime, as an attempt to demonstrate the indispensability of Russia in the potential resolution to the crisis. Without the Russian proposal, which the US was weary the regime would accept, the United States would have been unable to facilitate an agreement between the parties for the weapons removal, leaving the entire international community at risk.

Russia has utilized its position as one of Assad's only allies by negotiating and mediating many of the international community's attempts at resolving the Syrian crisis. In early 2013, Russia hosted a Russian-Arab Forum with representatives from

various Middle Eastern countries in an attempt at resolving issues surrounding Syria. Russia has used its position in the conflict to display the significance of its mediation efforts, making Russia's involvement a necessity for peace or negotiations. Russia's goal in negotiating with the international community, the Syrian regime, and less frequently, the Syrian opposition has been to demonstrate the indispensability of Russia's position and influence in the crisis. Russia has utilized its position as one of the Syrian regimes only allies, using every available asset and opportunity to promote Russia's interests, influence, and power amongst the international system.

This chapter has examined Russia general foreign policy goals, as displayed in Russia's Foreign Policy Concept, while linking Russia's self-identification as a great power to its foreign policy agenda. Linking the connection of Russian identity to Russia's foreign policy provides a more comprehensive explanation and justification for Russia's overall goals and actions. These goals have been applied to Russia's foreign policy to expand its influence and establish its identity in the international system, but as Russia pursues its goals, it finds itself threatened by other countries pursuing their own policies that counter Russian interests. This is especially true in the case of countries in Russia's periphery, such as Syria, where Russia exerts a large amount of influence and is able to advance its foreign policy goals. This chapter has attempted to display Russia's relations with key participants in the Syrian Civil War, emphasizing how Russia has applied its policy in an attempt to advance its interests, power, and influence amongst the international system. Russian support for the al-Assad regime has helped facilitate Russia's goals internationally, regionally, and

domestically. For Russia, the removal of the al-Assad regime would spoil Russia's goals at increasing its power and influence in the Middle East, which would lessen Russia's influence and potentially strengthen Western influence in the region. This chapter has presented an analysis of Russia's support for the Syrian regime at the systemic level, while the following chapter will address factors of influence at the state level.

Chapter 4- Internal Factors

The prior chapter outlined Russian foreign policy and focused on Russia's relationships with other countries and how its decision to support the al-Assad regime has affected those relationships, but it is important to address how many aspects of Russian foreign policy have been influenced by domestic factors. Knowledge of the main domestic influences of Russia's foreign policy-making is necessary to develop a more comprehensive understanding of Russia's foreign policy. For every nation, domestic politics inform, inspire, and restrict foreign policy, affecting a nation's decisions and its outcomes. Scholars like James Rosenau have stressed the necessity to examine external variables on internal politics and internal variables on external politics.⁹⁶ Russia remains a country with immense internal problems, some legacies from Soviet policies, but others that have arose out of the changing international landscape. Under Putin, domestic political procedures have dramatically influenced and altered how Russia's government operates. Bureaucratic and institutional changes under Putin have distorted both government operations and the way the government communicates with the Russian people. As these operations continue to shift towards a more autocratic, central government, both domestic and foreign policy alike are affected.

A nineteenth century proverb states, "Russia is never as strong as she appears, and never as weak as she appears".⁹⁷ In a 2002 speech, Putin revised the proverb,

⁹⁶ James N. Rosenau, *Linkage Politics: Essays on the Convergence of National and International Systems*. The Free Press, New York, (1969).

⁹⁷ *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, s.v., "Russia", at www.britannica.com/eb/article-9109504/Russia (2015).

stating, “Russia was never as strong as it wanted to be and never as weak as it thought to be”.⁹⁸ Great power legacies, fueled by revenues from natural resources, have resulted in an assertive Russian foreign policy focused on validating Russia as a great power in the international system. Domestic factors have and continue to be a major force behind Russian foreign policy-making, therefore, it is impossible to dismiss Russia’s internal factors that continue to threaten and/or support Russian domestic and foreign policy goals. The energy rich nation has been plagued with serious social, economic, and political challenges that threaten Russia’s foreign policy agenda. Weak political institutions and a resource dependent economy have strained Russia’s attempts at great power status. This chapter will attempt to present the most significant domestic influences, be it threats or opportunities, to Russia’s foreign policy towards the al-Assad regime during the Syrian Civil War.

This chapter will outline four major influences to Russian foreign policy, specifically in the case of the Syrian Civil War, that have influenced Russia’s decision to back the al-Assad regime despite international pressure. The first section of this chapter will focus on the issue of regime type, examining how regime affiliation and the mutual fear for regime survival have influenced Moscow’s support for the al-Assad regime. The second portion of this chapter will focus on Russia’s energy policies, addressing the power behind Russia’s energy sector and its influence on government affairs. The third section of this chapter will attempt to correlate how internal conflicts and the rise of radical Islamic groups domestically, regionally, and internationally have influenced Russia’s support for the al-Assad regime. Any

⁹⁸ Mark N. Katz, “Policy Watch: Is Russia Strong or Weak?” *UPI*. (2006).

discussion regarding Russia's foreign policy and its political agenda cannot ignore Russia's concerns for its domestically driven threats, such as the continued violence in the Caucasus, which this thesis argues is Russia's most formidable domestic threat. The final factor examined is the influence of the government controlled Russian media and how the Kremlin utilizes this outlet for public support for its policy in Syria. For this thesis, these factors play the largest role in influencing Russia's foreign policy towards Syria. By focusing on how these factors influence Russian foreign policy-making, this chapter will provide a more comprehensive analysis how why the Russian government continues to support the al-Assad regime in Syria.

4.1 Regime Type

There is an obvious affinity between the regime type of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, which is a system of sovereign democracy or 'smart authoritarianism'⁹⁹ focused of self-survival. "Similarities include the political and economic dominance of a narrow closed caste of a clearly defined type of origin; unaccountable presidential rule; the unparalleled clout of the security sector; and the fiction of belated political reform".¹⁰⁰ While the removal of the regime in Syria may not have direct influence on the status quo of Russian domestic politics, unseating a 'legitimate' regime could demonstrate the potential weaknesses of regimes similar to Putin or al-Assad's 'smart authoritarianism'. These regimes challenge the traditional knowledge that liberal democracy is the norm that all

⁹⁹ Defined by Nico Popescu as a highly managed, illiberal democracy free from competition or opposition. The concept is similar to that of sovereign democracy defined in Chapter 3.

¹⁰⁰ Ekaterina Stepanova, "The Syria Crisis and the Making of Russia's Foreign Policy." *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* 199 (2012): 40-45.

countries should try to achieve. “Russia’s support for authoritarian governments is intended to entice these countries under its political and security umbrella and delegitimize the West for its criticisms of autocratic policies”.¹⁰¹ The growth of more authoritarian regimes, such as Russia and China, has alarmed scholars and political scientists alike, because these countries provide a model that challenges Western norms and power.

The fall of other authoritative regimes in the Middle East, such as Mubarak’s Egypt and Qaddafi’s Libya, have only strengthened Russian fear of regime change for the al-Assad regime. “Many in the Russian foreign-policy establishment believe the string of US-led interventions that have resulted in regime change since the end of the Cold War- Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya- is a threat to the stability of the international system and potentially ‘regime stability’ in Russia itself and its autocratic allies in its neighborhood”.¹⁰² “Accepting the principle of military action for regime change against repressive and undemocratic regimes would make Russian allies- if not Russia itself- and neighbors in the former Soviet space vulnerable to international interference”.¹⁰³ Russian support for regime security is extremely important due to the various ‘revolutions’ that took place in Russia’s former Soviet allies, such as Georgia, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, where support from Moscow has been guaranteed for similar regimes from external interference or intervention.

¹⁰¹ Janusz Bugajski, *Georgian Lessons: Conflicting Russian and Western Interests in the Wider Europe*. Washington, D.C.: CSIS. (2010): 18-19.

¹⁰² Samuel Charap, "Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention." *Survival* 55.1 (2013): 36.

¹⁰³ Talal Nizameddin, "Russia and Syria." *Cicero Foundation Great Debate Paper* 12.05 (2012): 5-6.

Ultimately, Russia has been the main supporter of the al-Assad regime and will continue to support any attempt at removing the Syrian president.

The ongoing civil war in Syria has displayed the fundamental differences between Russia's approach to intervention versus that of most of the international community. Russia does not believe the Security Council should authorize intervention to promote the removal of a sitting government or regime change. In the case of Syria, claims for humanitarian intervention have lost their weight with outright calls for regime change against the al-Assad regime. In a speech given by President Barack Obama in 2011, regime change was announced as a top U.S. priority stating that "the time has come for President Assad to step aside".¹⁰⁴ Obama stressed the US commitment to bring democracy to Syria, arguing "we will support this outcome by pressuring President Assad to get out of the way of this transition".¹⁰⁵ In Moscow, calls for U.S. intervention in Syria are viewed as a policy for ousting a government whose policy contradicts Western interests, as displayed by the removal of other regimes in the region. Russia's opposition to regime change is based not only on the norms of sovereignty and noninterference but also in concern about what happens after regimes are removed, which will be discussed later in this chapter. In the case of Syria, the current spread of radical Islamic groups in the region presents a threat to regional and international security, which Russia views would be made worse without the al-Assad regime.

¹⁰⁴ Barack Obama, "Statement by President Obama on the Situation in Syria." Washington, D.C. 18 Aug. 2011. Speech.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

Many countries, including the United States, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, have demanded international action or assistance in removing the al-Assad regime. To prevent the removal of the regime, Russia has provided the Syrian regime with a diplomatic umbrella by vetoing three UN Security Council resolutions aimed at multinational military intervention in Syria. For Russia, the removal of the Syrian regime would result in dire consequences, which will be discussed further below. Russian support for regime security in Syria can be linked to the Kremlin's preoccupation with Russian domestic state order, state sovereignty, and most importantly, regime affiliation. This is central to understanding why, after the removal of the Qaddafi regime in Libya and the uprisings from the Arab Spring, Russia has so adamantly fought against any attempt at removing the al-Assad regime in Syria. For Russia, Western support for the removal of a regime amidst internal crisis has presented a threatening precedent that worries those in power. Both Syria and Russia share a common regime type that allow for the exploitation of power by those in power, but for Russia, these governments are perfectly legitimate and regime removal will continue to be an option the Russian government will not support.

4.2 Energy and Oil

Russia has the largest oil and natural gas reserves outside of the Middle East, which is one of the country's greatest assets, playing a major role in the political and economic success of the country and its leaders. Russia's economy has implemented a petro-state system that favors isolation over competitiveness, with highly centralized, majority state-owned companies, such as Gazprom and Rosneft. Trenin

outlines the connection between Russian bureaucrats and the corporate interest behind Russia's foreign policy making stating, "under Putin's presidency, the Russian state has turned into something like Russia Inc., with top Kremlin staffers and senior ministers sitting on the boards of various state-owned corporations and taking an active interest in their progress and profits".¹⁰⁶ It is important to note that the energy sector of any country cannot be considered exclusively economic due to its strategic significance, but in the case of Russia, the politicization of its energy is extremely severe. Russia's energy exports have resulted in substantial economic recovery and have also been utilized to re-establish Russia as a major global power among the international community. The "political significance of the energy sector in Russia can be gauged from the fact that oil revenues alone fund roughly half of the federal budget and made up a quarter of GDP in 2010".¹⁰⁷ It is important to note that Russia's reliance on oil revenues and natural gas has left Russia's economic growth subject to the unpredictable changes of world prices.

Russia's official energy policy states, "Russia's mighty energy sector (is) an instrument for the conduct of internal and external policy' and that 'the role of the country in world energy markets to a large extent determines its geopolitical influence".¹⁰⁸ Russia has utilized its oil and gas sector as a foreign policy lever to successfully reinvent its great power status in the international community. Russia has sought to strengthen its position in the energy market, building oil pipelines in the

¹⁰⁶ Dmitri Trenin, *The Mythical Alliance: Russia's Syria Policy*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (2013).

¹⁰⁷ Nadir Kinossian and Kevin Morgan, "Development by Decree: The Limits of 'Authoritarian Modernization' in the Russian Federation." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38.5 (2014): 1678-96.

¹⁰⁸ James Sherr, "Russia and The West: A Reassessment." *The Shrivenham Papers* 6 (2008).

regions and monopolizing gas prices on its energy dependent neighbors. Russia's state-owned energy companies, such as Gazprom, are being used to expand and secure Russia's regional and global energy power and influence. Jurado asserts that "the energy policies pursued by the Putin administration-including the re-nationalization of Russia's energy reserves, the creation of state monopolies over the use of Russian pipelines, and the limitations placed on foreign ownership of Russian energy assets- are widely interpreted, especially by Western governments and oil and gas companies, as posing obstacles to international cooperation in the area".¹⁰⁹ It is impossible to overestimate the importance and role of Russia's natural oil and gas reserves and its influence on Russian foreign policy-making.

Both regionally and domestically, Russia has managed energy as a tool for establishing Russia as a major power. The abundance of Russia's oil and gas reserves and its indispensability as a major exporter of energy to the global market has allowed Russia to exploit the global energy market in Russia's favor. Russia's energy policy has been utilized as a tool of foreign policy in the following ways: interrupting or threatening to interrupt energy supplies, exploiting prices, the use of energy debts, government involvement or direct control of companies or infrastructure.¹¹⁰ Russia's energy diplomacy has been extremely effective but this is due to the direct involvement of governmental connections and interest. Scholars have examined how politicized Russia's role in the energy market really is, arguing, "foreign investors are met with obstacles, unpredictable changes of the regulatory framework and

¹⁰⁹ Elena Jurado, "Russia's Role in a Multi-polar World." *FORESIGHT* (2008): 9-10.

¹¹⁰ Robert L. Larson, *Russia's Energy Policy: Security Dimensions and Russia's Reliability as an Energy Supplier*. FOI-Swedish Defense Research Agency- Defense Analysis. A1104 (2006): 177-178.

politicized decisions aimed at promoting national interest on the expense of the market”.¹¹¹ The exploitation of Russia’s energy resources as a foreign and domestic policy tool cannot be understated, because for Russia, energy is one of the most important tools that continue to allow Russia to aspire towards great power status.

In the case of Syria, energy trade relations between the two countries have grown increasingly with the majority of the contracts in favor of Russian exports. Russia’s state-owned energy companies have utilized the absence of foreign companies in Syria’s energy sector, establishing extensive direct and indirect links between both governments. In late 2013, Russian state-controlled oil and gas company Soyuzneftegaz and the Syrian regime signed a 25 year agreement for the rights to drill and produce oil off Syria’s coast, covering 2,190 square kilometers of the Mediterranean Sea.¹¹² This agreement solidifies the support and cooperation between the Syrian regime and the Russian government, allowing Russia to capitalize on its alliance with Assad and increase its presence in the Middle East. The agreement not only supports the regime in Syria but also provides a new source of revenue for future support of the isolated regime. Russia’s energy exporters are worried that regime change in Syria would mean the loss of contracts, as was the case with Libya after the removal of the Qaddafi regime. Russian energy companies also suffered from the removal of Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq, with reports estimating that the Russian government and Hussein’s regime were mutually

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pg. 114.

¹¹² Borzou Daragahi and Henry Foy, "Russia Tightens Links to Bashar Al-Assad with Syria Energy Deal." *Financial Times*. 26 Dec. 2013.

channeling funds and resources for each other's benefit.¹¹³ For Putin, the results of the Arab Spring have had a negative impact on Russian economic relations, which threatens potential business deals between the Syrian regime and the Russian government. Putin has recognized the threat posed by regime change, stating "in the countries that have gone through...[Arab Spring,] Russian companies are losing the positions they built over decades on local markets".¹¹⁴

Compared to the other internal factors that influence Russian foreign policy towards Syria, Russia's energy sector may play the least important role. Russian-Syrian energy trade relations are insignificant compared to Russia's trade relations with Europe or other Central Asian countries, but Russia has utilized its relationship with Assad in order to gain more leverage in Middle Eastern energy markets. In short, Russia's energy relations with Syria play an important but by no means dominant role in Russia's foreign policy-making towards Syria. Since 2011, Syria's energy sector has faced challenges due to issues regarding the crisis and sanctions imposed from the international community, allowing Russia to utilize its support for the Syrian regime into bilateral energy relations with Syria. Russia's energy sector is such a significant part of Russia's total economy that it is impossible to discuss internal factors that influence Russian foreign policy without the influence of Russia's energy resources.

4.3 Internal Conflict/Rise of Radical Islam

¹¹³ al-Mada, "The Beneficiaries of Saddam's Oil Vouchers: The List of 270", *al-Mada (Translated and reposted at the Middle East Research Institute (MEMRI), (2004).*

¹¹⁴ Alexey Malashenko, "Russia and the Arab Spring." *Carnegie Moscow Center* (2013): 8-9.

Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia has dealt with several ethnically based domestic and international military conflicts. Russia has faced ethnic conflicts in the Caucasus, Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia, and Tajikistan, and has faced the threat of terrorism both internationally and domestically, which has had a major impact on Russia's foreign policy making. One of the most important conflicts, which helped shape Russian contemporary foreign policy, was the First and Second Chechen Wars. The First Chechen War began as an attempt to gain Chechen independence from Russia through various separatist groups, which were later supplanted by terrorist groups under the guise of radical Islam in an attempt to establish an Islamic Caucasus Emirate in the region. The radicalization of the Chechen separatist groups began after the First Chechen War, when nationalist leaders were replaced by Salafists, who urged for a global jihad against Russia, its citizens, and all other non-Muslims worldwide. In 1999, Russia invaded Chechnya as a response to the invasion of Dagestan from Chechen rebels of the Islamic International Brigade. While the campaign may have ended the de facto independence and restored Russian control over the region, the official reasoning behind the military operation was to counter terrorism in the region. Lo states that "the war was popular...not so much for purely territorial reasons, but because the general belief that intervention had been necessary in order to prevent the North Caucasus region... from becoming a constant source of terrorist threat, rampant crime and political and religious extremism that would directly undermine the security of Russia and its citizens".¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Bobo Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion, and*

Fighting the threat of terrorism in Chechnya provided Russia with justification for its military campaign against the Chechen territory, being portrayed as fight against both domestic and international terrorism. Major terrorist attacks against Russia, such as the 1999 Russian apartment bombings, the 2002 Moscow theater hostage crisis, and the 2004 Beslan school hostage crisis, helped solidify the fear of radical Islam from the Caucasus to Russian citizens and the international community. Then Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov declared Russia's war with Chechnya as "the front line of international terrorism", while emphasizing, "that Chechnya was a Russian internal affair".¹¹⁶ The Russian government invaded the Chechen region committing human rights violations, such as the Human Rights Watch testimony that "conducted over 500 interviews with Chechen refugees in Ingushetia, finding evidence of widespread arbitrary arrests, beatings, and military targeting of civilians by Russian forces".¹¹⁷ Scholars such as Bugaski argue, "Moscow manipulates the Islamic terrorist stereotype to convince the West that it is simply combating the common threat of *jihadism* in the North Caucasus and elsewhere on Russian controlled territory".¹¹⁸

For the Russian Federation, ethnic conflict has been and will continue to be a potential major source of domestic instability. The North Caucasus, Russia's most volatile region, presents the biggest threat to Russia's regional interests and stability outside of the growing threat of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. With regards to Syria, the internal conflict between Russia and Chechnya reveals two major domestic

Mythmaking. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan (2002) pg. 135.

¹¹⁶ M. A. Smith, "The Second Chechen War: Foreign Relations & Russian Counter-Reaction." *P31 The Second Chechen War*: 132. *Defense Academy of the United Kingdom*.

¹¹⁷ Kimberly M. Zisk, "Human Rights Violations in Chechnya: Implications for Western Assistance to Russia." *PONARS Policy Memo* 142 (2000): 1.

¹¹⁸ Janusz Bugajski, *Georgian Lessons: Conflicting Russian and Western Interests in the Wider Europe*. Washington, D.C.: CSIS. (2010): 68-69.

influences to Russian foreign policy: the issue of sovereignty and the rise of radical Islam in the region. Both issues will be further analyzed to further demonstrate how Russia's internal conflicts, specifically Chechnya, have influenced their policy in support for the al-Assad regime in Syria.

Rise of Radical Islam

After the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 2001, Putin saw an opportunity to reshape Russia's threats, specifically in Chechnya, as a threat of global terrorism. What began as a separatist campaign for independence was transformed to a major terrorist threat that became a major source of crime and political and religious extremism in the region, which Putin utilized for popular support amongst Russian citizens. Russia's position in the region and its conflict in the Caucasus allowed itself to utilize its role as an ally to the United States, in a 'war on terror', that the U.S. would be unable to handle on its own. Scholars argue that "the Islamic threat to the Central Asian regimes in the 1990s allowed Russia to aim to regain its former imperial influence in the region, and to claim justification for increasing the powers of the executive and the security services at the expense of human rights".¹¹⁹ Putin was able to demonstrate a number of political triumphs regarding Chechnya, such as restoring Russian territorial integrity in Chechnya, the demonstration of Russia's power and military forces, successfully preventing external pressure on an internal issue, and popular support from the Russian people, which helped strengthen Russia's overall power status amongst international community.

¹¹⁹ Peter J. S. Duncan, "Contemporary Russian Identity Between East And West." *The Historical Journal* 48.1 (2005): 293.

The transformation of Chechen forces from a separatist campaign during the First Chechen War to a radical Islamist movement during the Second Chechen War was largely due to the influx of foreign jihadists. Kroupenev argues that the radicalization of the separatist movement in Chechnya “began as a direct outcome of Russia’s military reaction to Chechen separatist tendencies” and that the “Chechen appeal to Islam exacerbated the conflict and, by welcoming the infiltration of foreign radical elements, led to further destabilization of the North Caucasus”.¹²⁰ Vidino adds that “as Islamism supplanted nationalism as the motivating factor of the Chechen cause, hundreds of Muslim youths from the Middle East and Europe flocked to Chechnya”.¹²¹

Putin and other government officials have been extremely vocal about their fear of terrorism and the increased terrorist attacks experienced in Russia due to the spread of extremism in the region. According to the Global Terrorism Database, Russia experienced an increase from 50 terrorist incidents in 2007 to 170 incidents in 2008 and an even higher 250 incidents in 2010.¹²² This increase in terrorist activities allowed Putin to apply ruthless measures as counter terrorism tactics in Chechnya, such as large-scale bombings, torture, and other human rights violations. The brutality of the Chechen terrorist attacks and the increased hostage takings have decreased international sympathy for the Chechen campaign; meanwhile, strengthening Putin’s

¹²⁰ Artem Kroupenev, *Radical Islam in Chechnya*. International Institute for Counter-Terrorism. (2009).

¹²¹ Lorenzo Vidino, "How Chechnya Became a Breeding Ground for Terror." *Middle East Quarterly* 12.3 (2005): 57-66.

¹²² National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). (2014). Global Terrorism Database. Retrieved from: <http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/Results.aspx?search=Russia&sa.x=28&sa.y=4&sa=Search>

policy in the region while distracting the international community from the human rights violations committed by the Russian military. A major change to the incidents of terrorism in the Caucasus has been the reduction of incidents in Chechnya and the increase of incidents in other republics, mostly in Dagestan, which accounts for the 262 out of 438 terrorist incidents that took place in 2012 alone.¹²³ The spread of terrorist activities throughout the region motivated by groups from the Caucasus Emirate, which is the central source of Islamic terrorism in Russia, poses one of the biggest concerns to the security of the Russian Federation. According to a U.S. Congressional Research report regarding security concerns in Russia, the Caucasus Emirate not only “receives substantial material and ideological support from the global terrorist network”, but it also “provides ideological, financial, and weapons support...in the North Caucasus and Volga areas, Moscow, and elsewhere”.¹²⁴ U.S. analyst Gordon Hahn has warned that the Caucasus Emirate has already expanded its operations with factions discovered in Belgium, Germany, Czech Republic, France, and Azerbaijan.¹²⁵

Scholars have focused on the strategic and economic motives behind Russia’s support for the al-Assad regime, but the deepening sectarian warfare in Syria and it’s

¹²³ Mairbek Vatchagaev, “Violence in Dagestan Accelerated in 2012.” *North Caucasus Analysis* (2013).

¹²⁴ United States. Cong. *Russian Political, Economic, and Security Issues and U.S. Interests*. By Jim Nichol. Cong. Rept. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, (2014): 21-25.

¹²⁵ Gordon Hahn, *Russia’s Islamic Threat* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 59-66; Gordon Hahn, “The Caucasus Emirate’s Return to Suicide Bombing and Mass Terrorism,” *Islam, Islamism, and Politics in Eurasia Report*, (2009); Gordon Hahn, “Abu Muhammad Asem al-Maqdisi and the Caucasus Emirate,” *Islam, Islamism, and Politics in Eurasia Report*, (2010); Gordon Hahn, *Getting the Caucasus Emirate Right*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, (2011); Gordon Hahn, “The Caucasus Emirate Goes Global,” *Islam, Islamism, and Politics in Eurasia Report*, (2012).

spread in the region has been a less analyzed, major factor behind Russia's foreign policy towards Syria. Russia has expressed its concern for the rise of radical Islamic groups in the region, especially due to the ongoing terrorist activities in the Caucasus and the current state of radical Islamic terrorism spreading throughout Syria and Iraq, not far from Russia's borders and its neighbors. In the case of Syria, factions opposing the Al-Assad regime, such as the al-Nusra front, have merged with various groups in Iraq, formerly known as Al Qaeda in Iraq, to form the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS or ISIS), which has now presented itself as a major terrorist concern in the region and to the international community. The development of ISIS has resulted in a US-led coalition of countries to combat the organization, which Russia has abstained from joining and has boycotted due to its lack of UNSC authorization. Magen has argued that Russia "is protesting against military intervention in Syria without a mandate from the UN Security Council, and without the Syrian regime requesting such intervention" because "of failure to include Russia on equal terms with the U.S. in making the coalition's main decisions on regional matters".¹²⁶ For Russia, the accelerating radicalization of Islamic groups and Russia's fear for its expansion in the region have bolstered Russia's support for the Al-Assad regime, which Russia has defended since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. Russia and the West both share concerns about the rise of violence in the region, but they differ greatly on the topic of solutions, where the former backs the regime in order to guarantee stability and the latter insists on Assad's departure, potentially leaving Syria even more unstable. The international community may have redirected its

¹²⁶ Zvi Magen, "Between Crises: If and When Russia Fights ISIS." *INSS Insight* 628 (2014): *The Institute for International Security Studies*.

attention in Syria from the al-Assad regime to the current concerns over ISIS, but for Russia the al-Assad regime continues to be a regime in need of support during the U.S.-led military intervention against ISIS.

One of the major issues surrounding the increase of radical factions amongst the Syrian opposition, is the concern of foreign fighters amongst the opposition. The current situation in Syria and Iraq has drawn more than 20,000 foreign fighters from all over the world in what the U.S. Chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee has called “the largest convergence of Islamist terrorists in world history”.¹²⁷ It is estimated that in Syria and Iraq today, there are over 1,700 Russians jihadis fighting alongside ISIS, leaving the Russian government worried about the growing threat of instability in the region and domestically.¹²⁸ For Russia, the reality of the terrorist threat that exists domestically is still a major concern. What was once a separatist organization has now turned into a desired independent Islamic republic that continues to fight against Russia, while pledging allegiance to the leaders of the Islamic State and defecting to the IS campaign. The Caucasus Emirate has been a vocal supporter of the Syrian opposition with an estimated 200 to 1000 Chechen fighters in Syria, leaving the Russian government concerned for the return of these trained terrorists domestically.¹²⁹ The rise of radical factions in the region and in the Caucasus is a major concern to the Russian government domestically and for its support for the al-Assad regime in Syria.

¹²⁷ Kukil Bora, "ISIS Continues Steady Recruitment As 20,000 Foreign Fighters Join Extremist Groups In Syria, Iraq: Report." *International Business Times*. Feb. 2015.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ Lizzie Dearden, "Chechen Isis Fighters under Omar Al-Shishani Threaten to Take Fight to Putin." *The Independent*. Independent Digital News and Media, 10 Oct. 2014.

For Russia, its policy in the Middle East provides the Russian government with the opportunity to cooperate with Muslims abroad in an attempt to win over the growing Muslim population inside of the Russian Federation. Russia's policy in the Middle East has been to emphasize the civilizational diversity of the West vs. the rest, but this emphasis has only divided Russia even further from Muslims in Russia and the Middle East, partly due to its support for oppressive regimes and its failure to prevent the interventions in Iraq and Libya. Russia has a significant Muslim population that has witnessed the inclusion of Islam throughout the uprisings of the Arab Spring, worrying officials in Moscow over the potential for opposition movements throughout the country. For many of the separatist fighters in the North Caucasus, the Arab Spring movement solidified the dialogue of Islamic solidarity with the opposition movement against the Russian government. For Russia, a country with over 25 million Muslims, domestic and foreign policies have demonstrated a counterproductive approach that "could motivate Russia's previously fractured Muslim leadership to unite and create a formidable social and political opposition".¹³⁰

The crisis in Syria and the development of the Islamic State has resulted in a fear of regional instability and the spread of radical Islam throughout the region. Russian politicians have warned that the fall of the al-Assad regime would destabilize the region and result in the spread of transnational Islamic networks. For Russia, a country that has fought and continues to fight terrorism, this fear has become more of a reality that has established connections to terrorist networks in its own country. The

¹³⁰ Olga Oliker, *Russian Foreign Policy: Sources and Implications*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Project Air Force, (2009): 39-41.

Russian government believes that the al-Assad regime is a preferable choice to the option of further instability in the region should the Syrian regime fall.

Issue of Sovereignty

One of the most important issues surrounding the First and Second Chechen Wars, in connection with Russian foreign policy towards the al-Assad regime during the Syrian Civil War, is the issue of state sovereignty. The concept of sovereignty is deeply rooted in politics and international affairs because it provides an agreement that is conducive to maintaining certain values and norms that are considered fundamentally important in global affairs. Sovereignty recognizes the necessity of international legal equality, or the equal status among independent, self-governing states. The issue of state sovereignty is enshrined in Article 2(4) on the UN Charter, which argues for the prohibition of the use of force, more specifically stating that states must refrain from the “threat of use of force against the territorial integrity” of another member state.¹³¹

Former UN Secretary General and former UN-Arab-League Joint Special Envoy to Syria, Kofi Annan recognized the changing nature of state sovereignty when he said, “sovereignty implies responsibility, not just power”.¹³² Sovereignty as responsibility implies that states are responsible for the affairs of protecting the safety and lives of its citizens, which holds the state responsible through the auspices of the United Nations. Francioni and Bakker assert that “it is generally accepted that all states have an international obligation to respect human dignity and to refrain from

¹³¹ United Nations Charter of the United Nations, art.2, para. 4, 24 October 1945.

¹³² Kofi Annan, 35th Ditchley Foundation Lecture. (1998).

committing gross violations of human rights such as genocide, torture, slavery, systemic racial discrimination or severe and widespread deprivations of the rights and freedoms of their citizens”.¹³³

The UN has established that states may not use force against other members of the UN and that states have a responsibility to protect its citizens, but as in the case of Syria, the al-Assad regime has been accused of using chemical weapons against his people along with other human rights violations. In the case of Syria, many proponents have argued for military intervention in the Syrian Civil War in order to protect the civilian populations against mass atrocities, which have been based on the norm of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). The international community has embraced the norm of R2P, but has been selective on its application. Previous interventions, such as Kosovo and Libya, which will be discussed below, have tainted many in the international communities view of intervention under a guise as humanitarian. Francioni and Bakker argue that “there is a general consensus today that the inaction of the Security Council, and especially the unwillingness of China and Russia to consent to the authorization of forcible intervention in the Syrian crisis is due, at least in part, to the destabilizing effects of the military campaign and the perceived *ultra vires* use of force in Libya, ...not only to save the life of civilians and to facilitate a cease fire, but to effectively bring about regime change, as has ultimately happened”.¹³⁴

¹³³ Francesco Francioni and Christine Bakker. *Responsibility to Protect, Humanitarian Intervention and Human Rights: Lessons from Libya to Mali*. Transworld 15 (2013): 1-14.

¹³⁴ Francesco Francioni and Christine Bakker. *Responsibility to Protect, Humanitarian Intervention and Human Rights: Lessons from Libya to Mali*. Transworld 15 (2013): 1-14.

The issue of intervention and sovereignty in Syria demands attention to the more recent ‘humanitarian intervention’ in Libya, which resulted in NATO air campaigns and assistance to the rebel effort to overthrow the Gaddafi regime. In the case of Libya, both Russia and China abstained from voting for UN Resolution 1973, which authorized “all necessary measures... to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack”.¹³⁵ NATO air campaigns, assistance to the rebels, and the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime convinced Moscow that the claims of ‘humanitarian intervention’ in Libya were utilized under the guise of the Responsibility to Protect as an elaborate disguise for regime change. Anderson attests that the intervening powers “took a distinctly limited license by the Security Council for humanitarian intervention in Libya and turned it into unlimited license for regime change”, which “has poisoned the well of political legitimacy for humanitarian intervention, through overreach beyond the terms of formal law”.¹³⁶

State sovereignty and the pattern of regime change under the guise of humanitarian intervention are both major factors behind Russia’s support for the al-Assad regime. Like Syria, Russia is a country that suffers from ethnic conflict due to racial and religious divisions. Unlike many of the republics in the region that evolved after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has failed to flourish into a nation-state with clear ethnic boundaries. Bugaski claims that “the prospect of territorial splintering could embolden the Kremlin to pursue more aggressive policies not only towards rebellious regions but also against several neighbors in order to divert attention from

¹³⁵ UN Security Council, *Security Council resolution 1973 (2011) [on the situation in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya]*, 17 March 2011, S/RES/1973 (2011).

¹³⁶ Kenneth Anderson, "Legality of Intervention in Syria in Response to Chemical Weapons Attacks." *American Society of International Law* 17.21 (2013).

Russia's weaknesses".¹³⁷ Russia has been effective in promoting values and norms in the international system, but has reserved the right to intervene in many former Soviet states, displaying how Russia has applied unique standards to concepts of sovereignty and non-interference to itself. Russia has been guilty of such events, such as the Russo-Georgian War, the First and Second Chechen Wars, and its most recent annexation of the Crimea, all of which could be deemed intervention worthy on behalf of many in the international community. Charap argues that the "notion that Russia could eventually be the target of such intervention might seem absurd in Washington, but suspicion, bordering on paranoia, of future potential U.S. intention runs deep in Moscow".¹³⁸ This fear, along with Russia's more aggressive policy in its region, has resulted in an increase of Russia's use of power in the international system, such as the UNSC, to avoid constructing a precedent that could ultimately be used against it.

For Russia, the situation in Syria is reminiscent of the wars fought with Chechnya and the continued terrorism experienced in the Caucasus region. In both conflicts the state fought against various opposition forces, which would later incorporate extremist Sunni Islam into their strategy. Putin has stressed that Syria has become the frontline in a global fight against radical Islamism experienced in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and now, a number of Arab states. Since the beginning of the protests in Syria, Russia has warned that the removal of the Syrian regime would result in religious sectarian war. For Russia, domestic and regional stability are a

¹³⁷ Janusz Bugajski, *Georgian Lessons: Conflicting Russian and Western Interests in the Wider Europe*. Washington, D.C.: CSIS. (2010): 42-43.

¹³⁸ Samuel Charap, "Russia, Syria and the Doctrine of Intervention." *Survival* 55.1 (2013): 37.

necessary prerequisite for successfully completing its foreign policy objectives and increasing its status in the international system.

4.4 Role of the Media

Over the last fifteen years of Vladimir Putin's time as prime minister and president, Russia has experienced an increase in state dominance of media outlets throughout the country, reaching levels of centralization and uniformity not experienced since the Soviet Union. Mostly all major national television networks are now controlled by the Kremlin, as well as large newspapers, online news, and radio stations. In 2006, Putin shut down or nationalized nearly all of the independent radio and television stations, forcing stations to stop broadcasting programs unapproved by the Kremlin. Journalists critical of the government have increasingly been silenced through harsh tactics, such as imprisonment and even death. In Russia, a country with weak democratic institutions, the media plays an extremely important role in the information, political outcome, and political environment in the country. According to reports, 70% of Russia's population relies on state-controlled television for their news, which has left the majority of Russians without narratives that compete with the state's political agenda.¹³⁹ This has resulted in a population unable to decipher the truth from the government's agenda, ultimately rallying support behind Putin and his domestic and foreign policies.

While the government has not shut down every voice of dissent in the country, it has utilized its control to help shape public opinion by restructuring international

¹³⁹ Thomas Campbell, Victoria Burnside Clapp, and Mathew Wallin. "Russian State Media." *American Security Policy: Briefing Note* (2014).

communications and structures of propaganda. State restrictions have limited the freedom of media through the way information is being restricted into Russia and to its citizens, but also by framing a particular political environment to earn public support for government policies. Russia Today (RT), one of Russia's largest state-owned television companies, was founded in 2005 as a channel to feed Russia's government propaganda and foreign policy to outside audiences around the world. "Perhaps no organization better traces the transformation of Kremlin thinking from soft power to weaponization than the Kremlin's international rolling news channel, RT," which has turned its attention from promoting Russia to making the West, especially the US, look bad.¹⁴⁰ The Kremlin has stressed the importance of utilizing soft power tools through media persuasion as a key instrument in its domestic and foreign policies. Putin's idea of soft power differs slightly from the traditional, Joseph Nye version of soft power. In the Russian media, soft power has been used less as a vision for attraction and more as a vision for manipulation. Putin has stressed the importance of a 'strong Russia' based on a belief that Russia is a unique civilization vying for international power. Control of the media has allowed Putin to tailor communications domestically and internationally from Russia, in an attempt to provide a more 'Russian' perspective on international events apart from the Western perspective.

Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, the Russian media has utilized the crisis as a tool in Russian domestic politics. During the beginning of the conflict,

¹⁴⁰ Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weiss, *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money*. Rep. New York: Institute of Modern Russia (2014): 14-15.

Russia was experiencing an outbreak of protests in response to Putin's presidential elections in early 2012. As a response to the protests, the Kremlin responded by blaming the United States for its plot against Putin's third presidential term, which was also utilized in the case of American intentions with the al-Assad regime in Syria. For Russia, the Arab Spring presented a new threat of international intervention in internal conflicts that were a result of popular protests against an authoritarian ruler. This new threat is something that Russia worries could lead to further demonstrations and/or potential intervention/regime change; therefore, the majority of state-owned Russian media has focused on the perspective of the al-Assad regime, while presenting the situation in Syria as a fight against American aggression and hegemony in the region. By simplifying the civil war, the media placed the context of the Syrian crisis into the same categories as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, as another Western efforts at regime change.

The Russian media portrayal of the Arab Spring, or what they called the Arab revolution, was portrayed not as developments of democratization but processes of destabilization. The uprisings throughout the region were attributed to the influence of external factors, such as Western interests, intervention for potential regime change, and the potential to reduce Russian influence in the region. The protests were compared to the color revolutions experienced against Russia by the former Soviet countries, which were also portrayed as a plot by Western powers for their own interest.

The media depiction of the Syrian crisis differed greatly in Russia compared to external news sources. Bagdonas claims that "what was seen in the West as a

growing armed reaction to crimes against humanity perpetrated by a brutal regime, in Russia appeared as a concerted effort by Western states and their Arab clients to sabotage any chances for a peaceful resolution of the conflict and to overturn the government that still enjoyed the support of the majority of Syrians”.¹⁴¹ Since the beginning of the conflict, Syrian opposition to the al-Assad regime were portrayed as radical fundamentalist groups, presenting the conflict as the regime’s struggle with terrorism, which resonated in Russia due to its experience with terrorism in the Caucasus. Russian government officials and the media stressed the potential for extremism as a result of the revolutions, which was presented as a potential threat to the Russian state. In a study focusing on Russian popular opinion in Syria, Philipp Casula highlights how the Russian media negatively portrayed the numerous Syrian opposition forces, which “barely mention the peaceful opposition against Assad and completely ignore its violent repression and the human rights violations by the regime”.¹⁴²

Russian media sources went beyond misrepresenting opposition groups and the regime alike by distorting the events occurring in Syria, sometimes spreading disinformation in an attempt to justify Russian support for the al-Assad regime against the opposition forces. During the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, Russia Today reported of an alleged massacre by rebel forces, which was later found to have no evidence supporting the claims.¹⁴³ When most of the international community and

¹⁴¹ Azuolas Bagdonas, "Russia's Interests in the Syrian Conflict: Power, Prestige, and Profit." *European Journal of Economic and Political Science* 5.2 (2012): 57-58.

¹⁴² Philipp Casula, "Civil War, Revolution or Counter-Insurgency? The Syrian Conflict through Russian Eyes." *Russian Analytical Digest* 128.10 (2013): 4-7.

¹⁴³ "Russia Condemns Adra Massacre, Calls on World Community to React." *Russia Today*. Dec. 2013.

even a UN investigative team placed suspicion on the Syrian regime for the chemical weapons attack in August 2014, Russia Today and other government controlled media sources reported of proof that the Syrian rebels were to blame for the use of sarin gas against civilians. Russia Today published an article using a MIT report to challenge U.S. accusations that the Syrian regime was responsible for the chemical attack.¹⁴⁴ It is obvious through the use of incorrect findings and claims that support the Kremlins objectives that the Russian state-controlled media is aiming at confusing public opinion, spreading disinformation, and discrediting Western messages.

This chapter (Ch.4) has examined and demonstrated the main domestic factors that have influenced Russia's foreign policy-making towards the al-Assad regime in Syria. For Russia, a strong centralized government is key to state control over every resource available towards Russia's goal of great power status. Overall, the autocratic approach that Putin has utilized in his regime to enforce state control over the energy sector and the media are part of an effort to strengthen and stabilize the current political system and the elite that control that system. By strengthening and preserving Moscow's power domestically, Putin is able to mold foreign policy as he sees fit with economic and public support. For Russia, a country that has dealt with intense internal conflict, the issue of potential instability, an increase in terrorism, and the spread of radical Islam both domestically and regionally present a major threat to the stability and success of the current Russian government. To finalize this chapter, I would like to reiterate how influential these factors have been for Russia's support of

¹⁴⁴ "MIT Study of Ghouta Chemical Attack Challenges US Intelligence." *Russia Today*. Jan. 2014.

the Syrian regime. For the Russian government, these domestic influences are utilized for both domestic and foreign policies attempting to strengthen Russia's power domestically and internationally. These factors have helped Putin justify and further strengthen the relationship between the Russian government and the Syrian regime. This chapter has demonstrated how each of these factors has influenced Russia foreign policy in support for the al-Assad regime.

Ch. 5- Conclusion

This thesis was aimed at examining Russia's support for the al-Assad regime during the Syrian Civil War through the lens of constructivist theory, which questions the 'national' understanding of a state's interest, focusing on identity and local factors that influence foreign policy. By using constructivist theory, this thesis was able to demonstrate how an identity of great power status has influenced Russia's self-perception of that as a great power both domestically and internationally. This thesis' main research question was aimed at answering the following question: why does Russia support the al-Assad regime during the Syrian Civil War? While attempting to answer this question, this thesis also sought to examine what domestic factors are linked to Russian foreign policy implementation towards Syria and how Russia's foreign policy decision towards Syria is affecting its relationship with the West and countries in the Middle East. By examining great power rivalry theory, which focuses on how the distribution of power in the international system influences the number of great powers and their polarity, this thesis demonstrated how the idea of Russian great power status has resonated into the idea that Russia must think and act like a great power with the privilege of involvement in matters deemed important to national interest. For Russia, its foreign policy is a tool utilized in the pursuit of increasing its great power status, which is an intrinsic part of the Russian national identity, or image, already engrained from a historical legacy that has left Russia seeking international power and status.

In order to properly analyze Russia's foreign policy towards Syria, this thesis employed two levels of analysis: state and systemic. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, Russian support for the al-Assad at the systemic level is based on Russia's overall foreign policy goals focused on strengthening Russia's position and influence in the international system. At the state level, Russian support for the al-Assad regime can be traced to select domestic factors aimed at strengthening the Russian state and removing any challenges that would prevent Russia's rise as a great power. At the state level, domestic factors such as regime type, energy policies, internal conflicts/the rise of radical Islam, and the role of the Russian media have had the greatest influence on Russia's foreign policy in support of the al-Assad regime. These domestic factors help shape Russia's self-perception of itself, how it interacts with the international system, and how it shapes its foreign policy. Analyzing Russia's support for the al-Assad regime at the state and systemic levels provides a more comprehensive explanation for Russia's behavior in support of the unpopular, internationally isolated Syrian regime.

Excluding this chapter, this thesis consisted of four chapters aimed at analyzing Russia's support for the al-Assad regime. Chapters 1 and 2 contain background information to the current crisis in Syria and a review of relevant literature, while establishing the theoretical framework utilized in this research. The review displays that some scholarly literature regarding Russia's support for Assad are based on micro level explanations focused on interests that are unable to provide a complete explanation for Russian foreign policy-making. Extensive research into this complex issue of Russian foreign policy towards Syria displays an absence of

comprehensive scholarly literature. That being said, this research has intended to display the complex reasoning behind Russia's foreign policy towards Syria through a constructivist theory approach.

The following findings support this thesis' hypothesis while answering the questions and sub questions presented. Chapter 3 addresses how Russia's foreign policy has been influenced by factors of identity that contribute to Russia's self-perceived great power status. As displayed by Russia's Foreign Policy Concept, Russian foreign policy is driven by goals meant to strengthen and secure Russia's international status, which will enable Russia to (1) pursue and secure its future interests and (2) preserve the growth and relatively peaceful security environment it has recently experienced. By examining Russia's foreign policy and linking how identity has influenced that policy, Chapter 3 then examines Russia's relationships with various countries that oppose or support the al-Assad regime, displaying how Russian behavior is linked to its self-perceived great power status. Russia has utilized its support for the Syrian regime in an attempt at strengthening its self-perceived great power status through its foreign policy. Chapter 4 presented the most significant domestic factors that have influenced Russia's support for the al-Assad regime. For Russia, these factors present challenges and opportunities to Russia's foreign policy goals and its perceived great power status. The energy rich nation has been plagued with serious social, economic, and political challenges, such as weak political institutions and a resource dependent economy, which this thesis has displayed plays a significant role in Russia's foreign policy towards the al-Assad regime during the Syrian Civil War. This thesis has demonstrated Russia's desire for great power

status, focusing on how Russia has utilized this its relationship with the Syrian regime to strengthen and project Russian global, regional, and domestic power and influence.

American hegemony and its power and influence have been waning, heralding a new era of rising multipolarity. Russia's self-perception as that of a great power has resulted in a strong domestic and foreign policy aimed at positioning Russia as a pole of power that counters Western influence and interests. Russia's support for the al-Assad regime in Syria has brought new economic and political cooperation and opportunities with many countries in the Middle East. Russian behavior in the Middle East has been that of a strong, powerful nation able to provide alternatives to Western interests while satisfying Russia's interests. Russian foreign policy-making can be viewed as an evolving attempt to define and advance its country's power and influence with the overall goal of great power status recognition. Russian support for the al-Assad regime has provided a boost to its international status by providing support for policies that counter Western interests, such as nonintervention and state sovereignty. In the case of Syria, sovereignty has been one of the main arguments used to defend Russian support for the al-Assad regime, with the goal of establishing a more multipolar world free from intrusion of Western interests. For Russia, the "vision of the future is one where a greater number of voices can be heard, western and non-western, northern and southern, particularly when it comes to establishing the parameters for each state's economic and social development".¹⁴⁵ For the Russian government, any attempt at intervening in the Syrian Civil War outside of the approval of the UN Security Council, would be in direct violation of Syria's

¹⁴⁵ Elena Jurado, "Russia's Role in a Multi-polar World." *FORESIGHT* (2008).

sovereignty; therefore, Russia has and continues to defend the Syrian regime despite internal pressure for al-Assad's removal in a greater attempt to defend state sovereignty and prevent regime change on behalf of Western interests.

This thesis has displayed that Russia's support for the al-Assad regime is based on an identity of great power status, which Russia has utilized domestically, regionally, and internationally in order to strengthen its status. For Russia, the current conflict in Syria has less to do with the status of refugees or the human rights violations committed by the Syrian regime and is more focused on Russia's gains and interests overall. Russia's support for the unpopular regime has impacted its status among many nations that have called for the removal of the al-Assad regime. Given Russia's domestic and foreign policy and its historical tradition as a strong state led by authoritarian figures, Russia's behavior towards the al-Assad regime is comprehensible. Yet Russia's great power objective and its support for the Syrian regime have resulted in a hardline response to the Syrian conflict and Russia's involvement. Ultimately, Russia support for the al-Assad regime should not be viewed as a policy attempting to save and strengthen the Syrian regime, but instead is focused on securing and strengthening the Russian regime and its attempt at great power status.

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